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# An Analysis of National Educational Assessment Policy in the People's Republic of China and the United States

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**AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT POLICY IN  
THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES**

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**AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT POLICY IN  
THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES**

**GUOFANG YUAN**

**ABSTRACT**

Ongoing changes in educational assessment policies within China and the United States have created numerous challenges in interpreting and comparing these policies because of the two very distinct contexts. On the one hand, educational assessment policies seem to be diverging, with the United States moving towards more standardized testing and China moving away from it. On the other hand, the policies and the reforms seem to converge, with both nations utilizing standardized testing as an important vehicle for educational improvement. In China, the college/university entrance examination was reinstated in 1977 after it was discontinued by the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Under unique political and economic circumstances, a series of testing policy reforms and measures were initiated and implemented in the 1980s, in order to correct the tendency to pursue the one-sided promotion ratio to a higher level of schooling and to counter the negative consequences of test-oriented education. Since the 1990s, as Chinese education reform deepened, educational assessment reform was implemented along with other reforms with regard to curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy. The goal was to achieve a quality education with an improved standard in national education, so that education could best serve China's economic development and improve its competitiveness in globalization.

Since 1983, American education reform, with an aggressive involvement of both the federal and state governments, focused on creating and implementing more competitive educational standard for students, teachers, and school administration in a global context. From Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, U.S. presidents, for both political and economic purposes, attempted to push American education toward a more competitive and international standard of better quality. Through a brief description of the national educational assessment policy documents in China and the United States, and an analysis of these policies and critiques, this dissertation will attempt to uncover the economic and political forces that have driven the national educational assessment reform in the two societies, as seen from both national and global perspectives.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS

### Overview

#### *China and the U.S. - Two Systems of Education*

As part of a system that rewarded effort and achievement for any citizen to become one of the ruling elite, sophisticated written civil service examinations have been in existence in China as early as 2200 B.C. (Ebel, 1972; Solomon 1985; Suen & Vu, 2006). After the Civil Service Examination was officially instated in the sixth century, for most people social mobility was achieved through accessible educational opportunity and the ability to succeed in a number of competitive state examinations. German sociologist Max Weber, who conducted a thorough study on China, made an incisive observation on the social significance of a successful education to the Chinese people: “For twelve centuries, social rank in China has been determined more by qualification for office than by wealth. This qualification, in turn, has been determined by education, and especially by examinations” (Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 416).

In contrast to China, the U.S. written examinations have a comparatively short history. Although examinations had always existed in secondary schools and colleges, attempts were not made to systematize competitive exams until the mid-nineteenth century Horace Mann, the Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education in the

middle nineteenth century, was recognized as having made the first attempts to standardize educational achievement testing in the United States (Chauncey & Dobbin, 1963). As early as 1845, Mann suggested that a uniform written examination be prepared and given to all students (Behling, 1980).

### *Testing – Types and Purposes in Education*

For decades, testing as an educational assessment form has been practiced in China and the U.S. for similar purposes: to check students' knowledge acquisition and the effectiveness of teacher instruction, and to select and place students into different schools or programs, in light of the students' test scores. Since the 2002, when the *No Child Left Behind Act* was signed into law in the U.S., testing has also been used to reward or sanction students, teachers, and school administration in terms of "effective" learning, teaching, and administration. In short, the primary purpose of testing as an educational assessment form under *No Child Left Behind* was to make students, teachers, and school administration accountable for improving educational quality and standards (Kosar, 2005; Mc Guinn, 2006).

In China, the emphasis on testing has been influenced by a philosophical belief that student learning and educational quality are measurable with quantitative data - test scores. Students' effort and ability in learning can be measured in their test performance (Yang, 2003). Former Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping pointed out that testing is an important method used to check the effectiveness of both student learning and teacher instruction, and it is as necessary and important as testing for manufacturing product, which insures the quality and standard of the product manufactured in a factory (Chinese Education Year Book, 1984).

There are many types of tests and examinations in the field of education. But generally, most tests and examinations can be categorized as either internal or external examinations. Diagnostic and summary examinations, which are used to monitor achievement during or at the end of a semester or term, are classified as internal examinations (Hao, 1993; Lu, 1993). Unified (national or regional) and standardized student examinations outside of the schools are external examinations. Examples of external examinations include: unified student admissions (entrance) examinations for schools, colleges, and universities, graduation examinations in primary school, secondary school and high school in China, proficiency examinations in different subjects for students in various grade levels in U.S. public schools, professional certifying examinations, as well as examinations for employment of personnel in all types of trades (Lu, 1993).

In terms of test purposes, external examinations can be norm-referenced tests, which are designed to show where a given student stands (scores) in comparison to a group of peers (usually a national norm), or the tests can be criterion-referenced (selection-oriented), which are designed to check if a given student/candidate has achieved a specific standard/criterion (Lu, 1993; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1987). Each of these examination types is designed and implemented with differentiated objectives and requirements, and therefore, is characterized with distinct properties. For example, The Entrance Examination for Admissions to Colleges/Universities (高等教育入学学考试 , Gaodeng jiaoyu ruxue kaoshi) in China, and the entrance examination for high schools (中等教育入学考试 , Zhongdeng jiaoyu ruxue kaoshi) are designed to select candidates

for a higher level of schooling; thus, these two tests are both norm-referenced and selection-oriented (Yang, 1993). However, the graduation examination (used in both secondary middle schools and high schools in China) is criterion-referenced, and is designed to determine whether or not secondary middle school students and high school students have met the prescribed educational standards to graduate with a diploma (Lu, 1993). The various grade-level proficiency tests and the graduation examinations for U.S. high school students are also criterion-based, and are designed to determine whether or not students and teachers have met the prescribed educational standards (national or state) for grade-level promotion, or for graduation with a high school diploma.

Standardized tests might also be categorized into aptitude tests and achievement tests (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1987). Aptitude tests measure student skills, such as quantitative reasoning, analytic reasoning, and other skills. However, achievement tests are performance assessments that measure student knowledge in a particular subject or content area, such as reading, math, and writing (Kosar, 2005). The Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), and the American Collegiate Test (ACT) are aptitude tests. Achievement tests may also include: Subject Test (formerly SAT II) and proficiency tests, which are now routinely given during various school years to determine students' progress before promotion to the next grade, or before graduation in the U.S. public schools (Marzano & Kendall, 1998; Ravitch, 1995); graduation examinations in general middle schools in China could also be considered achievement tests (Lu, 1993).

The main feature of the three Chinese entrance examinations (*The Entrance Examination for Admissions to Secondary Middle School* 初中入学考试, *The Entrance*

*Examination for Admissions to General High School, and The Entrance Examination for Admissions to Colleges/Universities*) is that they measure student achievement to both the relative and the absolute standard (Lu, 1993). Students selected for the secondary middle school, the high school, and then for the college/university are assessed against an absolute standard (i.e. whether their test scores are above the prescribed passing mark), and are simultaneously ranked according to their test scores. Students' test scores are used as an exclusive criterion for admissions; students who obtain higher scores are ranked higher, and have better opportunities to enter more prestigious schools (Qian & Huang, 1987; Yang, 1993). Students whose test scores are below the prescribed passing mark might not have an opportunity to enter a higher level of school; this occurs because most high schools and colleges in China cannot accommodate all of the candidates who need or desire a higher level of schooling (Yang, 1993). The passing mark is prescribed by the government plan that identifies how many candidates will be accepted for a higher level of schooling.

#### *Testing for Higher Education and Economic Development*

In the U.S. educational testing system, pre-college students are usually measured by an absolute standard. The American model centers on a comprehensive high school that accommodates all or most of the students from a given area under the same roof, but differentiates by means of special programs and ability grouping, or by homogeneous grouping within programs (Husen, 1984; Kirst, 1988). According to individual interests and plans, a student could have many different options, including which high school to attend and what type of classes to take. At least theoretically, college education is generally available to any U.S. citizen who wants it.

However, secondary high and higher education is not accessible to all people who desire it in China. Although China has launched a national educational movement of Nine-Year Compulsory Basic Education for all children, and has been reporting that the percentage of schooling for school age children has steadily increased to 95 percent (Ministry of Education: *Report of Education Statistics in 2005, 2006*), the compulsory basic education does not include a secondary high school education. The national average admission rate to secondary high schools from secondary middle schools is still as low as 53 percent (Ministry of Education: *Report of Education Statistics in 2005, 2006*). The admission rate to higher education (by secondary high school graduates) is as low as 21 percent nationally (Ministry of Education: *Report of Education Statistics in 2005, 2006*). Therefore, for many years, Chinese basic education has over-emphasized student test scores, and the educational system was entirely selection-oriented (Yang, 1993). Despite the widespread desire for higher learning in China, examinations and test scores have been the only comparatively justified method for determining the select few who will have this educational opportunity in a state-planned economic system. Students were provided opportunities of higher level learning only if their school performances are evaluated and equal to their test scores (Hu, 1986). This model of education and assessment gradually failed to meet the needs of market-oriented economic reform, the open-door policy, and China's increasing integration into the world economy.

Since China's opening and reform policies were initiated at the end of the 1970s, China changed politically and developed economically (Rosen, 1997). More and more people have rising incomes, and they are willing and able to afford a higher level of education. With these changes, China's educational aims shifted. China's socialist

construction and modernizations have grown to require a more highly-educated people. China's education shifted to meet the demands of the national construction and the individual's personal educational needs (Cheng, 2004). China's education system restructured to meet the challenges from the global economy.

Since 1977, and in order to meet the needs for establishing a socialist market economy, testing policies in China have been continuously reformed. With changes in the political system, as well as in the science and technology infrastructure, education policy served China's socialist construction and modernization with Chinese characteristics (Yang, D., 1995). For the first stage of this testing policy reform, emphasis was given to the reform of the entrance examination for secondary middle school, and policy-makers sought to lighten students' heavy school burden (Qian & Huang, 1987). For the second stage, a two-fold reform emphasis was placed on graduation examinations and entrance examinations for high schools and colleges/universities, and a reduction in students' over-loaded school burden (or learning burden). Reforms of the curricula, teaching materials, and pedagogy were put forward in the third stage (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998). Overall, educational assessment reform in China has been aimed at improving the quality of education for the socialist construction and modernizations (Gu & Liu, 1994).

Zhu Kaixuan, Minister of Education, stated in the 1990s: "Education is no longer dissociated from the economy... Education is closely lined with the economy, and has become an organic component and key content of the plans for economic and social development" (Rosen, 1997, p. 259). Minister Zhu (1997) suggested that Chinese education should be a quality-oriented education, and it should not be the ongoing testing-oriented education. Minister Zhu clearly stated that test-oriented education is not



equivalent to a quality education. Test-oriented education does not produce competitive human resources to promote China's economic development and competitiveness in the global economy (Gu & Liu, 1994; Yang, 2004). In 1985, the Chinese Communist Party decreed that curriculum, teaching contents, and pedagogy in basic education needed to be reformed in order to meet the demands of socialist modernizations (*Decision of the CCP Central Committee on the Reform of the Educational System*, 1985). In 1988, the State Education Commission proposed that Chinese basic education be reformed to move away from testing, and toward a well-rounded education, so as to lighten students' school burden (The State Education Commission: *Suggestions on Re-Orientating Teaching and Learning in General Middle Schools to Quality Education, Correcting the Tendency of Blindly Seeking for Promotion Ratio, and Reinforcing Educational Supervision*, 1988).

Similarly, confronted with challenges from domestic economic developments and global economic competition, American schooling tuned increasingly toward a focus on economic development. Since 1983, competitive educational standards for public schools were initiated, debated, and installed in a long process aimed at achieving quality education (Jennings, 1998; Ravitch, 1996). Criterion-referenced proficiency tests were used to evaluate whether or not the students and teachers had met the state and national educational standards. The U.S. emphasized quality education in terms of educational efficiency and effectiveness (Ravitch, 1996), although equality of educational opportunity was still an important goal. The new standards-based education reform was intended to link students' school achievement to both students' and teachers' efforts and dedication (Darling-Hammond, 2004). It was argued that students' school performance depended more on efforts of students and schools, rather than on the home (socio-

economic) backgrounds of students (Beare & Boyd, 1993). Education reformers in the United States held schools, teachers, and students accountable for an improved school performance, characterized by better scores on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Many education reformers and business community leaders regarded students' test scores as the best index of educational efficiency and effectiveness - they wanted to see the outcome of their investment (Koppich & Guthie, 1993; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In an effort to provide a quality education, U.S. educational reformers and policy-makers set up national or state educational standards for public education (Jennings, 1998).

#### *Testing, Standards, and Quality Education*

Since 1993 in China, testing policy reform is mentioned together with quality education (The State Council: *Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development*, 1993). In 1999, the State Education Commission stated that Chinese education should be continued and tuned to the reform of college/university entrance examination, the reform of the curriculum to be tested, the testing contents, the testing form, and the admission policies, so as to promote quality education for national economic development and effective participation in the global economy (The Central Committee and the State Council: *Decisions on Deepening the Education Reform, and fully Promoting Quality Education*, 1999). The State Council and the Central Committee of the CCP also stated clearly in “*The Acting Strategy to Vitalize Chinese Education from 2003-2007*” that the core of Chinese basic education reform was to promote educational quality for both national construction and global trade. The key to the basic education reform, according to this document, was in educational assessment reform; the focus of

the educational assessment reform was on the reform of curricula, teaching material, and instructional pedagogy (The Ministry of Education, 02-10-2004).

Along with the ongoing educational reform in China, the U.S., after the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983, began a new wave of reform activity to improve student school performance (Jennings, 1995; Koppich & Guthie, 1993; Ravitch, 1995). This reform gradually involved more educational issues, such as national standards/state standards for education, testing and curricula, testing scores, and accountability (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ravitch, 1995). In order to establish national and state standards for American education, American presidents immersed themselves in educational reform. President George H. W. Bush called national governors and held education summits to discuss education reform, and announced “America 2000” in the spring of 1991; President Clinton signed “Goals 2000: Educate America Act” into law in 1994 and the “Improving America’s Schools Act” in the same year. All of these political efforts were driven by the attempt to establish competitive education standards for students and teachers, thereby improving the quality of American education. In the 1990s, the educational reformers attempted to establish national and state standards for the U.S. public schools, to ensure competitive international educational quality (Jennings, 1998; Ravitch, 1995). Under these rigid educational standards and goals, schools, teachers, and students were held accountable to improve achievement. This national-centered educational standard-and-assessment-based reform reached a new climax in 2002 when President George W. Bush signed *The No Child Left Behind Act* into law (Mc Guinn, 2006).

The attempt to establish national standards for American schools (in order to reform the whole educational system) has sparked continuing debates over the last two decades. Kevin Kosar (2005) thought that there were two main political forces that have inhibited the enactment of federal standards policy: *anti-statism* and *liberalism*. According to Kosar (2005), *anti-statism* refers to the distrust of federal involvement in the public schools and *liberalism* would be described as ideas and theories of government that advocate individual liberty and equal opportunity. Anti-statists believe that schools are the responsibility of states and localities, and that the federal government should stay away from them. However, some liberals believe that states and localities cannot be trusted to provide good schooling to all children. Moreover, some liberals hold that the federal government is more trustworthy than state and local governments. Although liberals might have favored the federal government policy to improve schooling for the dispossessed and discriminated, they might be in disagreement with the attempt to establish national educational standards for all children (Kosar, 2005; Mc Guinn, 2006). In the standards-based education reform, differing views of federalism and the decentralized state caused conflict, which slowed down the reform (Jennings, 1998; Ravitch, 1995).

In contrast with the continuing debates over reform in the U.S., as a highly centralized state, China did not encounter strong opposition from different groups in policy-making. The reform initiatives and policy were made and passed down from the central government. Local government and schools expressed their full embrace of the policy and support of the central government's decision. The dissenting voices were not heard. However, there were many problems in the execution of the policy in the local

government and schools (Yang, 2003). A good example is that the central government attempted to reduce students' school burden and correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher schooling in many schools since 1982 (Zhang, 1997). But, these problems remain - the primary and secondary education in China is still test-oriented. The promotion rate is still the most powerful criterion used to evaluate whether or not teachers and schools are successful. The local officials and schools claimed their full embrace of these reform initiatives and policy, but they resisted change and hesitated to put these initiatives into practice (Wu, 1995; Yang, 1993; Yang, 2003, Zhang, 1997).

### Goals of Analysis

#### *The U.S. and China – Educational Policies Under Scrutiny*

In this dissertation, the national educational assessment policies in public schools in both China and the U.S. will be studied for a general introduction to the two systems. No specific region, case, or school will be studied in depth. Rather, this dissertation looks at testing policy at the national level. Three types of norm-referenced entrance examinations (Ruxue Kaoshi 入学考试) will be discussed regarding Chinese testing policy: entrance examination for admissions to secondary middle school, entrance examination for admissions to secondary high school, and entrance examination for admissions to colleges/universities. A special emphasis will be placed on the policy of college/university entrance examinations, which produced profound impacts on Chinese social, economic, and educational development (Lin, 1993; Luo & Wendel, 1999; Niu, 1993). Changes in curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy will be also considered and analyzed, since these aspects also affected national assessment policy.

Moreover, educational initiatives and policies on standards and assessment in U.S. public schools (since 1980) will be briefly reviewed and analyzed from political, economic, and social perspectives

## Process and Problem Statement

### *Document Review and Analysis*

This study will attempt to provide a brief introduction to the national educational assessment policy change for public schools through policy documents analysis in China and the U.S. at a national level. The study focuses on the policies regarding the three principal norm-referenced entrance examinations in China: *the entrance examination for admission to secondary middle school, the entrance examination for admission to high school, and the entrance examination for admission to colleges/universities*. As a comparison, no specific type of test in the U.S. will be examined. This research mainly focuses on the education reform for quality education.

This study will show a review of the principal policy documents regarding changes to the three important entrance examinations, as well as the relevant critiques of these policy practices and changes in Chinese educational assessment reform. This study will also consider those key changes and critiques in standards-based educational reform in the U.S. since 1983. These policy documents will be closely examined in order to identify themes, underlying messages, and subthemes. Primary policy documents, as well as secondary documents (critiques of primary documents) will be analyzed in terms of language, including terms of repetition, tempo, consistency, and so on.

Then, using the theoretical framework of document study, this study will examine these reform initiatives through a policy analysis based on the policy documents and

critiques of those documents. The study will attempt to uncover themes in the policy documents, such as quality education, equity education, education standards, and curriculum reform, accountability, and their importance in each of the two reform policies. Through a discourse analysis, this study attempts to uncover if quality education was the chief goal of the two reforms. What are the philosophical and actual approaches that these two societies have taken toward accomplishing the educational reform goals in the global context? Why has the U.S. moved toward embracing testing and assessment in policy reform, while the Chinese government has made efforts to back away from it, even though both nations participate in the same global economy? And how do these seemingly opposite policy directions represent convergent or divergent goals toward educational reform?

### *Interpretation and Analysis*

After a close study of the documents and critiques, a comparative interpretation will be conducted to seek the commonalities and differences in the main themes—quality education, education standards, accountability, school burden, one-sided pursuit of school promotion, and globalization. These themes, and the subthemes that emerge, will be reviewed, analyzed, and discussed in narrative form for the reader. Conclusions will be made about the underlying meaning of the repetitive terms in the critical documents and further discussion will address the changing philosophy of education and direction of reform in each nation state. Additional conclusions will help to create a narrative history of the reform efforts that have succeeded and failed in each nation, as well as how these changes will shape the future of education in China and the U.S. Eventually, this research

will attempt to discover the forces that drive the reforms in the two nation-states at a national level. Given the rhetoric of education reform in the two nation-states, both China and the U.S. seemingly target a similar educational goal - to achieve a quality education for all. Given this, several questions arise. What are the different approaches that these two societies take to accomplish their educational goal in a global context? Why has the U.S. moved toward embracing testing assessment, while the Chinese government intended to back away from it in policy-making, even though both nations participate in the same global economy? Do these seemingly opposite policies signal convergence in the global system or do they represent distinct national paths? And how would they represent convergence or divergence in their respective educational reforms?

#### *Significance of the Problem*

There is a Chinese proverb, which states that there are always other hills whose stones are good for working jade. As the world is increasingly global, one nation's experience in education reform can be beneficial to another nation's reform efforts. The positive and negative experiences and consequences of Chinese educational assessments serve as good references for the current American standard-based educational assessment movement. In light of the former American experience, Chinese educational assessment reform attempted to move away from the selective norm-referenced tests and toward standardized criterion-referenced proficiency tests. The key difference is that the promotion of students to a higher level of schooling is not based upon a single test performance, but a comprehensive evaluation of the student in other respects will be considered for his or her promotion (Yang, 1993).



Education reform is an international trend. As Beare and Boyd (1993) insightfully remarked, there has been a simultaneous rush of educational reconstruction occurring in many countries around the world since the middle of 1980s. Particularly since the 1990s, because the world has grown increasingly interdependent and global, the efforts of many educational reformers contain commonalities with other countries around the world. For example, both China and the U.S. have started educational reform by reforming testing policy, and both have tinkered with educational assessment to improve the quality of the schools for a global economy. It is beneficial for different societies to learn from the policy changes and education reforms of others in this global world.

Despite the remarkable differences in cultural, social, economic and political systems, the initiatives of educational assessment reform for both China and U.S. are similar: to restructure schooling for improved educational quality, so as to meet the global challenges in an international economic competitive market. In the U.S. and China, educational and economic development is interdependent and inevitable, and education keeps changing to meet the needs of economic development. The Chinese government continuously focused on the importance of quality education in economic development. Current international economic competition relies on the advancement of science, technology and management skills, which heavily depends on the quality of education (The State Council, 1993; *The Central Committee and the State Council*, 1999). If a nation's education system is able to prepare professionals and workers for international competition and is able to help advance economic development, then the nation will succeed in the global marketplace (The Central Committee and the State

Council, 1999). Global economic competition has already provided the impetus for education reform in both societies.

Similarly, the main reason for education reform in the U.S. lies in national economic development and political purposes. American leaders have become frustrated over the declining capacity for the U.S to compete in global markets; they have attributed this incapability to the underachievement of public schools (Long, 1984). They have held that the quality of human resources is a critical element in the efficiency of the nation's economy. School improvement for better-educated workers was the only way to outpace the Japanese and Germans in the world economic competition (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Another concern arose from the U.S. defense establishment regarding national security. American schools needed to provide a better education for youth so that the U.S. would be able to keep ahead in military and economic competition with other nations (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This competition started with the Cold War; however, this competition continued as the former Soviet Union collapsed. Additionally, the competition intensified in the new global economy, and countries were vying for position in a new world order.

This study will provide references for the educational reforms in both the U.S. and China. Chinese experiences and lessons in testing-oriented (and selective) education might be informative to the current U.S. education reform, which, until the early 1980s, seemed to stress a developmental growth model rather than test scores (Jennings, 1998). Since 1983, in the light of *A Nation at Risk*, the U.S. education system began to move towards standard-based education reform (Ravitch, 1995). The Chinese educational

system (up until the early 1980s), stressed testing and selectivity, but since the late 1980s, Chinese government launched an educational reform that tried to move away from this model, and to move towards an education model of less testing, less selective testing, and gradually replaced the selective testing with standardized criterion-referenced proficiency tests (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998). For the past few decades, China's educational reform started with a reinstalling of college entrance examination with a focus on testing and selectivity, but has since moved to a quality-oriented education, which stresses a developmental growth model rather than test scores. Since the 1990s, China's education policy-makers repeated that education should be student-centered, and focus on students' humanity development, instead of an emphasis on student test scores and promotion rate (Yang, 2004). Therefore, China could learn from the U. S. tradition with regard to child development and quality education.

In a global context, the implication for education reform might be universal: what seems new in one nation might not be unique to other nations (Robinsohn, 1992). National trends in educational reform seem to be converging. For example, the Chinese government requested that education move to reduce its reliance on selective testing in order to improve educational quality, specifically with regard to having access to a more humanistic curriculum. The focus of education should move toward the development of the student as a whole person. Students, instead of teachers should be the center of all educational activities (Zhang, 1997). This is also what the U.S. education system has been attempting to do. Besides proficiency test scores, there used to be more other ways of assessing student achievement, including portfolio assessments, teacher evaluations, and so on. Regardless of the many differences, the U.S. educational reformers and policy-

makers have tried to establish state and national standards for American schools in order to ensure a high quality of education. A national educational standard is not new to Chinese educational system. Traditionally, China's education has required compliance with a unified national or provincial standard. In this sense, this research will provide references for educators and policy-makers in their attempts to improve both quality education and equity education at a national level in the two nation-states.

### Limitations of the Research

This research is a comparative study of the educational assessment reforms situated in two distinct cultural, social, and political contexts. Globalization is applied as the theoretical framework for understanding the trends of the two educational reforms, and discourse analysis is used as the method to interpret the two respective policy documents in the reforms. This writer seeks understanding of the two policies in the contexts in which he lives and works. As an individual researcher, he develops subjective meanings of his personal experiences. These subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual lives (Creswell, 2003). Moreover, this researcher seeks to improve his understanding of the two policies from my personal perspective, rather than to present a universal "truth" or "meaning" for all audiences.

However, regarding these differentiations, this study also has some unintended limitations. First, there might be some language barriers in completing and understanding this research. All documents on Chinese testing policies are originally written in Chinese and then personally translated into the English language. In many cases, the researcher encounters difficulty in conveying Chinese meaning effectively into appropriate English

language terms. Second, due to cultural differences, the readers might find it hard to understand the Chinese documents that have been translated into English. There are many culturally-specific political clichés, slogans, and terms in these policy documents. Many political clichés and terms have been overused for decades. This might be regarded as a limitation for those readers who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture and society. Third, some educational issues such as lightening students' school burden, reforming educational assessment system, and promoting quality education have been repeated for decades in the policy documents. These terms were also repeated over and over in this research, and hopefully, the readers can discern that these issues were really chronic in China's education reform. Fourth, there is a serious scarcity of critiques of Chinese educational assessment reforms from Chinese educators. In many cases, Chinese educators, critics or policy-makers tune their "critiques" of the policies or initiatives to the mood of the government. Many critiques just follow the government's tone, and repeat those big words or political clichés from the documents (that may be difficult for some outside reader to understand). Fifth, as a Chinese researcher, the writer looks at the U.S. educational assessment reform from a Chinese perspective. Although his foreign perspective allows him to be aware of his biases, it is a great challenge to avoid personal biases and limitations completely, in terms of differences in culture, language, system and society. Finally, there are distinct disparities between educational theories and educational practices, and between policy-making and policy implementation in China (Yang, 2003). The detailed analysis of implications of these disparities is beyond the scope of this research. For example, although the government attempts to move away from exam-oriented education, and toward a quality education, basic education in China

is still heavily exam-oriented. In summary, although this research might have limitations, it will present a solid picture of the ongoing educational assessment reforms in the two nation-states, and it will provide some references and ideas for educators and policy-makers in the two societies.

### Definition of Key Terms

For a better understanding of this research, some key terms regarding educational assessment policies and practices need to be defined briefly.

#### *The Entrance Examination for Admissions to Secondary Middle Schools*

(初中入学考试 *Chuzhong Ruxue Kaoshi*) - This test used to be an important norm-referenced examination administered by the county-level educational bureau for elementary school graduates. The examination, based on prescribed curricula, teaching and learning materials, was designed to select the academically qualified students, in accordance with the candidate's total scores on the examination, for secondary middle school education. However, this examination was gradually aborted after 1986, when China started to implement a nine-year compulsory basic education policy (five/six years of elementary school education and four/three years of secondary middle school education). Today, elementary school graduates generally go to the secondary middle schools without taking the Entrance Examination for Admissions to Secondary Middle Schools.

#### *The Entrance Examination for Admissions to High Schools*

(高中入学考试 *Gaozhong Ruxue Kaoshi*) - This test is a norm-referenced examination administered by the prefecture-level educational bureau for secondary

middle school graduates. The examination, based on the prescribed curricula, teaching and learning materials, was designed to select academically qualified students, according to the candidate's total test scores achieved in the examination, for a high school education, or for other vocational school education. It is also used as an important means for tracking the admitted students into different schools (a key-point middle school or a common school) and different classes (fast or slow classes). Key-point schools and fast classes are more equipped, better staffed, and highly supported.

#### *The Graduation Examination in General High School*

( 普通高中毕业考试 *Putong GaoZhong Biye Kaoshi* ) - Initiated by Shanghai and

Zhejiang Province in 1980s, this is a criterion-referenced proficiency test administered by the provincial educational bureau for high school graduates. The purpose of this examination is to ensure that the candidates have met the educational standards prescribed by the State Education Commission, in order to graduate with a high school diploma. It is also regarded as one of most important strategies in educational assessment reform that is used to assess and promote a quality high school education.

#### *The Entrance Examination for Admissions to Colleges/Universities*

( 高等教育入学考试 *Gaodenjiaoyu Ruxue Kaoshi* ) - It is the most important

norm-referenced examination administered nationally by the State Education Commission. It is given to a select group of academically well-prepared and qualified candidates from the high schools for entrance into colleges/universities. The examination is nationally unified and based on the curricula and teaching materials prescribed in the State Teaching Plan. The examination is always referred to as a "Civil Examination in

Modern China” regarding its influence and selectivity. Gaining admission to colleges/universities is the ultimate goal for most Chinese students, teachers, schools and parents in the endeavor for a better education; it also the only semi-accessible avenue for social and economic mobility for most peasant children from villages.

### *Key-point Schools*

(*重点学校 Zhongdian Zhongxue*) - In China, key-point schools usually include a few selected elementary schools, secondary middle schools, and high schools. Since the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party began to nationally select a few schools with a solid foundation, and then fully supported these few schools with strong school leadership, adequate funding, the best educational facilities, and the most prepared faculty and students. All key-point schools are academic and test-oriented. The dominant objectives for selecting and developing a few key-point schools were as follows: to concentrate limited educational resources on a few key-point schools so as to improve both educational efficiency and educational quality; to provide academically well-prepared students for colleges and universities; to select (through competitive examinations) and educate these academically highly-prepared students so that they may become competitive professionals for socialist development and construction; to improve these key-point schools into model schools for those common or general schools to mimic (普通学校 Putong Xuexiao). General schools could learn about quality teaching, quality learning, and efficient and effective administration, so as to promote an overall national public education quality, and to improve educational efficiency as a whole.



### *Quality Education*

(素质教育 *Suzhi Jiaoyu*) - In the Chinese context, quality education refers to a well-rounded (holistic) development education based upon the practical needs of the individual's human growth, and the development of society. Quality education also refers to desired qualities, such as citizenship and political ideologies required for socialist construction with Chinese characteristics. For its fundamental purpose, quality education is intended to promote well-rounded enhancement of the basic quality of all students, and at the same time holds a respect for each student as an individual being. Quality education emphasizes the exploration and development of the latent capacity of human wisdom and knowledge, and stresses the formation of a sound humanity in terms of moral, intellectual, and physical development. While “quality education” in the U.S. context contains more elements, such as strong leadership and vision, quality instruction, clear standards, assessment and accountability, adequate and equitable resources, family participation, and community involvement for effective learning and instruction. Most importantly, quality education is assessed by: if students are prepared to be lifelong learners that can communicate effectively? Are students being taught to access information and think critically? And will these students be productive members of society?

### *Promotion Ratio/Rate/Percentage*

(升学率 *Shengxuelu*) - This rate is the percentage of all school graduates who are accepted to a higher level of schooling. The percentage rate was decided by students' test scores on entrance examinations. For over two decades, it has been the only method used

to assess student learning, teacher instruction, and school administration. To increase the promotion rate has been the goal for many schools in China.

### *Lightening Students' School Burden*

(减轻学生学习负担 *Jianqing Xueshen Xuexi Fudan*) - This term has been a catch phrase in education in China since the beginning of 1980s. School burden refers to any form of unreasonable schoolwork that is imposed on students by schools or teachers (often the burden is meant to provide students with intense training for better testing scores). School burden is closely related to the test-oriented education- the tendency of the one-sided pursuit of higher promotion rate for higher level of schooling. Students are usually required to do too much homework, the school time is extended, and students are given too many external tests.

### *Education Standards*

According to Kosar (2005), a standard is a model or benchmark that is applied to judge the adequacy or quality of something else. In education, there are three standards: content standards, performance standards, and opportunity-to-learn standards. *Content standards* refer to knowledge and skills that students are expected to master at a certain grade level; *performance standards* refer to the levels of mastery of the standards that one must reach to be certified as a certain level; while the *opportunity-to-learn standards* refer to those necessary resources available to carry out learning to prescribed education standards. In the U.S. context, standards refer to state-level thresholds.

### *Criterion-referenced Tests*

The criterion-referenced tests are designed to measure the proficiency, the material, or the skills that a test-taker has mastered. Most criterion-referenced tests are referred to as mastery tests. The score on a criterion-referenced test is independent of the performance of the other students who were tested. Each student's performance is only compared to the criterion of mastery, rather than to the performance of the other students. Regardless of anyone else's performance, a criterion-referenced score will simply tell whether or not the candidate displayed proficiency at the level of the skills that were tested.

#### *Norm-referenced Tests*

The norm-referenced tests, in contrast to criterion-referenced tests, are designed to compare individual student performance with the scores of other test-takers. In a norm-referenced test, the procedure, materials, and scoring have been standardized and fixed, and an individual's performance is interpreted and compared in terms of the "normal" or average performance of a reference group. On a norm-referenced test, a student's score takes on meaning only in terms of how his or her performance is rated with the performance of other students in a norm or reference group.

#### *SAT (Scholastic Assessment Tests)*

The SAT is one type of scholastic aptitude examination administered by the College Entrance Examination Board. *The Scholastic Assessment Tests* include both the *SAT I: Reasoning Test*, previously known as the *Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)*, and the *SAT II: Subject Tests*, previously known as the *College Board Achievement Tests*. The *SAT I* is designed to assess the intellectual potentials needed to perform well in college (rather than mastery of the content in a particular curriculum). The test assesses critical

thinking and reasoning skills, while *SAT II: Subject Tests* refers to achievement tests that are used to measure a student's current knowledge and ability in certain subjects.

#### *ACT Assessment*

The *ACT Assessment* is another scholastic aptitude examination required by most colleges prior to student admission. The *ACT Assessment* is created and designed by the American College Testing Program. In contrast to the *SAT*, the *ACT Assessment* includes tests in four content areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. These tests are more content-oriented in these subjects than the *SAT I: Reasoning Test*. All of the items included in the *ACT Assessment* are written in multiple-choice format. The *ACT Assessment* also focuses on the application of reasoning and problem-solving skills related to material from the test areas; less emphasis is placed on pure recall of the factual material that might have been taught in a specific course.

#### *Proficiency Tests or Standardized Tests*

Nationwide assessments designed for use in U.S. public schools as a way to measure student proficiency in various subject areas, teacher efficacy, and school success. These tests are intended to provide critical information about successes and failures in public schools, so as to initiate necessary school, district and national improvements to curriculum, teacher training, school leadership, and so on. These assessments were used to hold teachers, students and schools to accountable for quality education since No Child Left Behind was enacted.

#### *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*

This is a term used in *No Child Left Behind* defined as following: "(i) Applies the same high standards of academic achievement to all public elementary school and

secondary school students in the State; (ii) is statistically valid and reliable; (iii) results in continuous and substantial academic improvement for all students; (iv) measures the progress of public elementary schools, secondary schools, and local educational agencies and the State based primarily on the academic assessments (v) includes separate measurable annual objectives for continuous and substantial improvement for each of the following: (I) The achievement of all public elementary school and secondary school students. (II) The achievement of—(aa) economically disadvantaged students; (bb) students from major racial and ethnic groups; (cc) students with disabilities; and (dd) students with limited English proficiency" (*NCLB*, 2002, Part A, Subpart 1, Sec. 1111, 2[c]).

### *Accountability*

Accountability in education refers to the practice of holding educational systems (state, school district, school, and teacher) responsible for the quality of their products—students' knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes. Specifically, the products refer to students' school performance, which is often interpreted by students' test scores.

### *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*

The *No Child Left Behind Act* was signed into law in January 2002 by President George W. Bush, as his primary educational reform agenda. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* was the reauthorization of a number of federal programs that attempted to improve the performance of America's primary and secondary schools by increasing the educational standards of accountability for states, school districts, and schools, as well as providing parents with more flexibility in choosing which schools their children will attend. Additionally, it was meant to promote an increased focus on reading, and helped

to re-authorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The *No Child Left Behind Act* required states to create an accountability system of assessments, graduation rates, and other indicators. Schools needed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP), as determined by the state. Schools in danger of not showing AYP would have to take “corrective action”, and may be encouraged to restructure the internal organization of the school. There is a continuing debate over this educational law.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### POLICY DOCUMENT REVIEW AND ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

#### Overview

This comparative document study will focus on the principal and supportive policy documents regarding education reform since the 1980s in China and the U.S. Accordingly, the literature review focused on the important policies and reform documentation in the two nation-states. Chapter Two will provide a basic literature review of the primary and secondary government documents in Chinese educational policies to help illustrate the educational trends in the test-oriented society. Additionally, documented U.S. educational policies and developments will be reviewed in order to identify the evolving context for this comparative study, and to help provide justification for the current research methods. Based on the aforementioned literature review, several research questions have been identified as the focus of the current research. Relevant methodological theories, supportive and controversial documentation, and analysis procedures will also be provided for the reader.

## Documentation of Chinese Education Reform Policies

### *A Testing Tradition in China*

As a highly centralized nation with a tradition of education testing for more than one thousand years, there exist some complex implications for testing policy and its chronic consequences in China (Suen & Yu, 2006). For over two decades, Chinese education seemed to be in a philosophical deadlock regarding which was more critical - quality education or exam-oriented education (Yang, 2003). After ten years of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the college/university entrance examination was reinstated in 1977; Chinese education went back to its tradition, and was once again selective-testing oriented (Lin, 1993). Students' entrance examination scores and the promotion rate to a higher level of schooling (at all levels) used to be the main index applied to evaluate schools, teachers, and students (Yang, 1993). In order to pursue an increased promotion rate of graduates to a higher level of schooling, students were overloaded with an academic burden of more assignments and more classes, or extending school time (Niu, 1993).

*Testing and its social consequences.* China has long history of civil exam. Si-Yu Teng (1966), a scholar from Taiwan, gave a detailed study on how Chinese examination system developed and was borrowed and promoted by western countries in *A History of Chinese Examination System*. Hu Xiao-Lu (1986), a graduate student from Kent State University, in *The Role of the Entrance Examination in the Admission System to Higher Education in the People's Republic of China*, stated that examination, particularly the college entrance examination, was the ultimate goal of both teaching and learning in China.



*The China Quarterly*, published by Cambridge University in Britain, was a leading scholarly journal that provided historical perspectives, in-depth analyses, and a profound understanding of China and Chinese culture and society. Of its published articles, “Chinese Education After Mao: Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Backward and Start Again” by Suzanne Pepper, a professor from Hong Kong University, and “Chinese Educational Policies in the 1980s And Economic Development” by Marianne Bastid, an expert in Chinese studies from the French Institute in France, analyzed the implications of Chinese education reform and the national economic development. After Mao’s regime, China’s education reform was tuned to serve its economic development and modernization.

Jing Lin (1993), a professor in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at University of Maryland, in *Education in Post-Mao China*, also pointed out that there was a serious problem in education equality between rural and urban students, and between the poor and wealthy students. She criticized that this inequality resulted from urban-centered curriculum design and resource distribution. The nine-year compulsory education could not improve rural students’ situation if the big college entrance examination was not reformed for more flexibility. Also regarding education inequality in China, Niu Xiaodong (1992) completed a thorough research on how the children of government officials gained privilege over the children of working class people entering college in his book *Policy Education And Inequalities: In Communist China Since 1949*. In the context of Chinese society, Niu claimed that success on educational exams in China was the only way to achieve social and economic mobility. This traditional belief in education made it difficult to reform China’s education system,

and facilitated the communist policy-makers to utilize education to serve both economic and political purposes.

*Comparative Education Review* was another journal that was referenced for China's education reform. In 2006, *Comparative Education Review* published "Chronic Consequences of High Stakes Testing? Lessons from the Chinese Civil Service Exam" - a thought-provoking article by Hoi K. Suen and Lan Yu, two scholars from Pennsylvania State University. This article provided timely reflections on the on-going U.S. education reform in reference to the practice and lessons from Chinese Civil Service Exam.

*Critics of test-orientation.* The negative impacts of this test-oriented education were increasingly debated and eventually criticized by some teachers, administrators, and educators. In 1981, Ye Shentao, a well-known educator and writer in China, published an article in *China Youth* and *People's Daily*, which condemned the test-oriented education, and its negative impacts upon students (China Youth, 1981; People's Daily, 1981). The article gained national attention with regard to the over-emphasis on testing and students' over-loaded school burden for the purposes of testing and school promotion. From 1983 to 2002, the Ministry of Education issued over sixteen circulars, proposals or orders to combat the continuing problems. And, they began to reform the testing system that was composed of three principal entrance examinations (from elementary to secondary middle school, secondary middle school to high school, and from high school to colleges). All of these changes were designed to promote a quality education (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998; Hao, J., 1993; Lu, 1993).

Critiques on Chinese education reform were comparatively inadequate. The purge of free speech in Mao's regime silenced any dissent in educational direction. On the one

hand, Chinese Educators and critics learned to follow the government in education policy and were cautious about their disagreements in thinking. On the other hand, it was not easy for foreign critiques and educators to gain a better understanding of Chinese education reform and policy because of possible barriers in language, culture, system, and because of other social and political factors, so many “critiques” were devoid of meaning, or were full of quotations or political clichés from policy documents. In spite of these challenges, some critiques were found helpful in understanding China’s education reform.

#### *Documented Reform of Testing Policy*

*Chinese Education & Society* was a critical source on Chinese education reform. It was published by M.E. Sharpe, Inc. Stanley Rosen, a professor from University of Southern California, and Gerard A., Postiglione, a professor from University of Hong Kong were the co-editors. Its editorial board included well-known scholars on Chinese society and education, such as Kai-ming Chen, John Hawkins, Ruth Hayhoe, Julia Kwong, and Suzanne Pepper. In 1993, *Chinese Education & Society* translated and published 15 papers written by Chinese educators on Chinese testing policy reform. Of these papers, 5 papers written by Yang Xuewei, the former director of the Ministry of Education’s National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA) from 1987 to 1999, were essential for insight into the Chinese thinking on educational policy and practice. Yang emphasized the necessity in reforming China’s entrance examination system, particularly the national college entrance examination, by pointing out those negative consequences resulted from entrance exams, such as school burden, one-sided pursuit of promotion rate, and testing-oriented education. Yang also expressed his concerns over the

dilemma this reform might be confronted with: in spite of the unintended consequences, entrance examinations were the best way to select candidates for a higher level schooling when educational resources were limited. Without testing, the rich and powerful could use their financial clout and contacts to secure the best schools or university for their children, and the poor remained at a disadvantage. Yet China's education reform could not be achieved if too much significance was given to test and test scores in decision making.

#### *Documentation for Quality Education*

In 1997, *Chinese Education & Society* translated and published 20 papers on education reform for quality education. These Chinese educators, in accordance with the central government, agreed that reform for quality education would be a continuing effort in China's market economy reform for globalization. China's testing-oriented education could not prepare competitive professionals for China's socialist construction. The key was to reduce the significance and the number of the tests, to reform curriculum and instructional pedagogy, and to shift from rote learning to creative and critical learning. Similarly, these educators also expressed their concern about the changes; how would they evaluate student learning and teaching if the testing system was reformed? However, without reforming the ongoing testing system, quality education reform would be incomplete.

#### *Policies Aligned with Economic Development*

In addition to these principal journal articles, the following books on Chinese education reform were also reviewed: *Deng Xiaoping's Education Thoughts and Modern Chinese Education* and *A Slow Sunrise: Challenges Confronting China's Modern*

*Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* by Yang Dongping. In the first book, Yang, the director of Higher Education Research at Beijing Institute of Technology, claimed that China's education reform, as China's reforms in economic and political system, was heavily influenced by Deng Xiaoping. Deng's reform efforts to promote efficiency through a system of responsibility reflected his neoliberal thoughts. Yang pointed out that Deng's "three orientations" in 1983 and speeches in southern cities in 1992 heavily influenced China's principal education reform policy making: *Decision of the CCP Central Committee on the Reform of the Educational System* (1985), *Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development* (1993), and *A Decision on Deepening the Education Reform, and fully Promoting Quality Education* (1999).

In "A Slow Sunrise," Yang blamed China's examination system for slow reform progress. Yang also criticized that the examination system affected educational equality; Yang recognized that the percentage of rural students who attend college was approximately one third of that of their urban peers. The best teachers and resources in China's primary and secondary education were concentrated in the cities, and this imbalance kept the poor at a disadvantage. He further argued that a main problem facing China's education system was that high schools catered to students' individual aptitudes, but that the current exam system was over-reliant on a single written test; this was an unfair method of assessing the overall capability of students, and therefore, a more flexible testing and assessing system was needed.

Yang continued to point out that China's educational reform was in a dilemma. The notion of a quality education and the practice of exam-oriented education were incompatible, which seemed to be substantiated by decades of documented Chinese

reform efforts for quality education (2003). Many educators in China argued that Chinese education reform needed to be studied within a Chinese context. Professor Hao Keming (1998), in *Twenty Years of Chinese Education System Reform*, agreed that China's education reform was successful in that education was more accessible to different groups than it used to be. With the increase in college educated individuals, China was more competitive in global economy. But this educational success was not enough.

Some foreign critics provided insight in understanding Chinese education and society. As early as 1983, Julia Kwong, a professor from University of Manitoba, published "Is Everyone Equal Before the System of Grades: Social background and opportunities in China" in *The British Journal of Sociology*. Professor Kwong argued that Chinese students did not compete equally because of their unequal social backgrounds. Even if they achieved the same test scores, those with better social capital would easily get ahead compared to those without the necessary capital. But Kwong believed that the test system would be an effective way for the government to choose excellent workers for the socialist construction. Kwong (2003) argued that as China merged into the global economy, the testing-oriented education system would need to be restructured in order to win in the global competition.

Stanley Rosen, co-editor of *Chinese Education and Society* and a professor from University of Southern California, also stressed that China's education reform was made to serve China's economic goals. In "Education and Economic Reform", Rosen (1997) said that in China, economic reform was ahead of education reform. Consequently, education reform was not well balanced, and used to be left behind by economic reform. Other influential critics such as Ruth Hayhoe, a professor of Chinese higher education at

University of Toronto, and Vilma Seeberg, a professor from Kent State University who focused on minority education, were also reviewed for their insight into related Chinese education issues.

#### *Education Reform Policy Documents – Specific Issues Addressed*

In this document study on Chinese education and testing policies, this researcher reviewed over 40 documented policies and laws issued by the Ministry of Education/State Education Commission, the State Council, the People's Congress, and the Chinese Communist Party. The reviews were categorized into different groups and themes in order to achieve a better understanding, but this categorization was difficult because these same documents were issued repeatedly in order to deal with the same chronic problems over the span of two decades.

*Compulsory education and college exams.* There are two significant reforms in China's educational testing policies in the 1980s. First, when China attempted to popularize the nine-year basic education, primary school students were allowed to enter secondary middle school without taking the selective entrance examination. The second effort was that the Chinese government tried to reform the college entrance examination and admission system (Yang, 1993).

Education reform in China started with the initiative for a nine-year compulsory basic education (九年制义务教育) (Gu & Liu, 1994). The five or six years of elementary school education, and the three or four years of secondary middle school education constitute the nine-year compulsory basic education in China. The State Education Commission categorized elementary school education, secondary middle

school education, and high school education into the category of basic education (基础教育) (Chinese People's Congress, 1986). However, there exists some confusion between the concept of compulsory education and basic education. The secondary high school education is regarded as basic education by the government, but it is not compulsory education, because the secondary high school education is still selective and not yet accessible to all graduates from secondary middle school (初中).

*Reform alignment with orientations and modernizations.* The Ministry of Education, in response to Deng Xiaoping's visit to Beijing Jinshang Middle School and his speech at the school, issued "*Proposals on the Teaching Principle in Six-Year Elementary Schools*" on August 15, 1984. The circular initiated some suggestions for reforming the elementary school teaching plans. The Ministry of Education clearly stated that, in conformity with Deng's "three orientations" of education (oriented to modernizations, oriented to the world, and oriented to the future) (教育要面向 现代化 , 面向世界 , 面向未来), it was time to reduce students' overloaded school and homework burden, and to correct the tendency to over-stress the entrance/admission examination for a higher level of learning. In Deng's speech and following documentation, "modernizations" refers to the *four modernizations* (Industry Modernization, Agriculture Modernization, National Defense Modernization, and Science and Technology Modernization). The circular suggested that the entrance examination should be gradually discontinued for elementary school graduates who plan to enter secondary middle



schools, because in some comparatively developed areas, secondary middle school education was accessible to *all* (The Ministry of Education, 1984).

On May 27, 1985, the Ministry of Education announced “*The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party’s Decisions on Educational System Reform.*” The CCP declared its decision and determination to reform the Chinese educational system and structure to meet the national demands of economic development. The announcement reiterated that the purpose of the educational reform was to make basic education accessible to more people, and thus, to promote human resources for socialist construction and modernizations (The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 1985).

In 1986, “*The Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*” was issued and enacted to popularize a basic education (nine-years) for *all* Chinese children. For the first time, the Chinese government stated that the implementation of the universal nine-year basic education depended on other relevant reforms: restructuring the educational system, reforming the educational assessment system, and reforming the basic education funding system so that the financial responsibilities would be on local governments (townships, counties, and cities) (The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 1985; Chinese People’s Congress, 1986).

The State Education Commission (the former Ministry of Education) issued a “*Circular on Reforming the Entrance Examination to Secondary Middle School Where Secondary Middle School Education Is Popularized*” on March 3, 1986. The circular stated that, beginning with the summer of 1986, the State Education Commission planned to reform the entrance examination system for secondary middle school, and then would

gradually abolish the same exam. At the same time, the local education bureaus and schools were to reduce the number of external examinations, in order to shift the focus from a testing-oriented education to a quality education; as a result, this would reduce students' overloaded school burden and stress about the testing demands (The State Education Commission, 1986).

On November 5, 1988, the State Education Commission issued *Regulations on Lightening Elementary School Students' Overloaded Academic Burden at School*. The Regulations stated that, in order to reduce school burden, all schools must conform to the teaching principles prescribed in the state directions, and schools should reduce the number of both internal and external examinations. The Regulations further stated that the local educational bureau and the local government should not rank or evaluate schools, classes, and teachers according to student entrance examination scores and the promotion ratio/percentage to a higher level of schooling. Teaching and learning should not be targeted at raising test scores or at increasing graduate promotion rate/percentage to key-point middle schools (The State Education Commission, 1988).

*Middle school reform.* Since 1988, Chinese educational assessment reform began to focus increasing attention on middle school education. Graduation examinations and college/university entrance examinations in secondary middle school received special attention. On May 11, 1988, the State Education Commission issued a circular of *Suggestions on Re-Orientating Teaching and Learning in General Middle Schools to Quality Education, Correcting the Tendency of Blindly Seeking for Promotion Ratio, and Reinforcing Educational Supervision*. The State Education Commission put forth suggestions about building up positive attitudes towards education in general middle

schools, so as to correct the tendency of teaching and learning one-sidedly for promotion ratio to a higher level of schooling (The State Education Commission, 1988).

*College entrance and exit exam reform.* The college/university entrance examination (often considered a civil service examination) is the most important educational test in China. Students, teachers, schools, and parents were all driven to succeed on the college examination as a way to validate teaching and learning (Fan, 1990; Luo & Wendel, 1999; Niu, 1993). Reforming this examination was the key to the changing the whole educational assessment system in China (Yang, 1993).

On July 26, 1989 The State Education Commission issued the circulars: *Proposals on Reforming College Entrance Examination and Admission Policies*, and *An Opinion on the Experimental Implementation of Graduation Examination System in General High Schools*. In the circulars, the State Education Commission announced several initiatives to reform the college/university entrance examinations, and identified their plan to develop a graduation examination system for all high school students in secondary high schools. The State Education Commission clarified that the key aspect in reforming these exams meant reforming the testing subjects, the contents, and the format, in order to promote an all-round development of a quality education (The State Education Commission, 1989).

*High school examination reform and quality education.* The State Education Commission realized that the college/university entrance examination was the only authorized educational assessment in general secondary high school that could be used to evaluate the performance of schools, teachers, and students. They also realized that the exclusive examination contributed to the one-sided pursuit of promotion ratio to higher

learning institutions (Wu & Luo, 1995; Yang, 1993). So, in order to change that situation, the State Education Commission clearly stated in *An Opinion on the Experimental Implementation of Graduation Examination System in General High Schools* that the main objective was to implement a graduation examination system for general high schools that would be distinguished from the college entrance examination. An additional educational assessment would be added to evaluate student learning and teacher instruction in general high schools (The State Education Commission, 1989).

In 1990, at the *Work Conference of the State Education Commission*, the Commission stated that the reform of the examination system was one of the four priorities in reforming the basic educational system in China. At this conference, the head of the State Education Commission remarked: “We must reform the examination system of high schools...The college and university entrance examination system itself will also be reformed at the appropriate time on the basis of the cardinal principle of benefiting the overall effective implementation of educational guidelines in the middle schools” (The State Education Commission, 1990, p. 2). The reform was intended to promote educational quality and would, consequently, reduce the significance of the test score in evaluating the performance of school, teachers, and students. In March of 1990, the State Education Commission held another “*National Work Conference for Reforming the System of Promoting Graduates from High Schools to Colleges and Universities, and the Examination System.*” This was meant to help implement the graduation examination system in secondary high schools.

*Curriculum and instruction reform.* In addition to continuing efforts in testing system reform, the education reform in the 1990s included the reform of curricula,

instructional materials, and pedagogy. These reforms were also targeted at a quality education for globalization (Wang, 1997; Zhang, 1997).

The State Education Commission, on March 8, 1990, issued a “*Circular of Proposals on Adjusting Teaching Principles in General High Schools.*” The Commission stated that, for a quality education, it was time to reform teaching principles and curricula for general high schools; this type of reform was closely related to the examination system reform, because without a successful system, quality education would not be possible (The State Education Commission, 1990).

The State Commission agreed that in order to correct the tendency of blindly pursuing promotion rate/percentage, an effective approach was to establish an additional assessment that could be used to supplement the single selective entrance examination for colleges/universities. At the same time, they suggested a reform to the curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy in general secondary high schools (Yang, 2003). On August 20, 1990, the State Education Commission issued a circular of “*Proposals on Initiating and Implementing a Graduation Examination System in General High Schools.*” The Commission put forward this set of proposals, and pointed out that the graduation examination was a criterion-referenced proficiency test, rather than a selective norm-referenced test (like the college entrance examination). The graduation examination was intended to assess whether or not a student had met the academic standards prescribed for a diploma, and if the school administration and teachers had met the objectives prescribed by the State Education Commission.

Despite the critical reforms of the testing system, curricula, instructional material, and instructional pedagogy in secondary schools and high schools, students’ school

burden continued to be a chronic problem (Hao, Tan Wang, 1998). There existed big disparities between the policy-making and policy implementation of educational reform. Teaching and learning are still exam-oriented, so the problem of promotion ratios and school burden were never effectively corrected (Luo & Wendel, 1999).

The State Education Commission issued, for the fifth time, “*Another Circular of Carrying out the Regulations on Lightening Elementary Schools Students’ Over-Burden in Learning*” on February 15, 1990. The State Education Commission urgently called for the reduction of elementary students’ school burden: students were burdened with too many internal and external tests, too many regional and national academic contests, too much homework, too many hours at schools, and too much pressure and anxiety resulting from school learning, tests, contests, and promotion (The State Education Commission, 1990).

*Documentation of the guiding principles toward reform.* The year of 1992 was a critical year for China’s deepening reform in the economy and in education. It was in this year that the former Premier Deng Xiaoping visited Shenzhen, the first economic development zone since China’s opening to the world, which helped to encourage the central Chinese leader to reform China (Chen, 2004; Yang, 1995). As a result, the Fourteenth Plenum Conference of the Chinese Communist Party (1992) clearly identified that the key to realizing the four national modernizations rested in education reform and development, namely in promoting Chinese people’s comprehensive competencies in ethics, culture, and science (The State Education Commission, 1992). In order to meet the demands and challenges from socialist construction, on February 13, 1993, the State

Education Commission issued *Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development*.

In the guiding principles, the State Education Commission stated that the educational system and structure needed to be reformed in order to meet the needs for establishing a socialist market economy, for reforming the political system, and for reforming the science and technology system, so as to best serve the socialist modernization construction with Chinese characteristics. The Commission further identified that the key points of reforming curricula, instructional materials, and instructing pedagogy, reforming the testing system in elementary, secondary middle school and high schools, implementing a graduation examination system in general high schools, and reforming the college entrance examination. The ultimate goal of these reforms was to move away from test scores and promotion rate, and toward a quality education for well-rounded (holistic) student development. The new Chinese education was meant to be oriented to modernizations, oriented to the world, and oriented to the future, instead of being oriented to the examinations (The State Education Commission, 1993).

*Policy attempts to reduce over-loaded school burden.* Over-loaded school burden was a long-term problem that was hindering Chinese educational reform, especially in terms of assessment (Yang, 2004). So on March 24, 1993, the State Education Commission issued a circular “*Directive on Lightening Students’ Over-Loaded School Burden in Compulsory Education Period so as to Promote Quality of Education.*” The Commission stated that secondary middle school admission policy needed to be reformed: elementary school graduates should be allowed to enter secondary middle

school without taking the selective entrance examination. The government should take measures to ensure that *all* students should be able to obtain grade promotion. At the same time, measures should be taken to reduce the pressure on students and teachers who are seeking promotion, and to reduce the emphasis on promotion ratio to another higher level of schooling (The State Education Commission, 1993).

*Documents address the one-sided pursuit of promotion ratio.* In order to correct the ongoing problem of promotion ratio to college/university from secondary high school education, the State Education Commission issued “*Proposals on Steadily Carrying out the Graduation Examination System in General High Schools*” on August 10, 1993. In this report, the State Education Commission called for a national effort to implement a criterion-referenced graduation examination in general high schools that could be used to assess student learning, teacher instruction, and school administration. This new exam was expected to update and correct problems associated with the existing educational assessment, which was exclusively based on the promotion ratio (The State Education Commission, 1993). However, no specific suggestions were provided on how to implement the new evaluation method.

Overloading students with too much of a study burden was a chronic problem that continued to attract a great deal of attention from both the government and the public (Yi & Li, 2004). On November 10, 1993, the State Education Commission again issued *Proposals on Fully Complying and Implementing the State Educational Principles and Missions, and Lightening Students’ Overloaded Burden of Learning in Both Elementary and Middle Schools*. The Commission suggested that the key to solving this burden problem was to change the approach to student learning and teacher instruction. The



arguments for reform were becoming repetitive and required incremental changes. Students were burdened by tests, and test scores were not equal to real learning and China's goal of a quality education. In order to overcome the test-oriented educational model, the education system as a whole needed to lessen the academic burden and correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate. This would change the nationally unified testing-oriented educational model that had been in existence.

At the same time, the government would initiate reform of curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy, so that methods would be tuned to the majority of students, instead of a small group of students who were hopeful for promotion to a higher level of learning. Educational practices should be student-centered, and educational bureaus needed to aggressively push for entrance examination and admission system reform. Test scores and promotion ratio to higher level of schooling should not be the only evaluation methods. Quality education should be the priority of the state (The State Education Commission, 1993).

#### *Chinese Policy Reform – Proposals Revisited*

As Chinese reforms in the market economy, the political system, and within science and technology were deepening, and as the world economy became increasingly and globally interdependent, the Chinese central government paid more attention to educational system reform (Yang, 2004). On July 3, 1994, the State Council issued *The Proposals on Carrying out "the Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development."* For the first time, the State Council stated that in order to meet the demands and challenges from Chinese market economy reform and Chinese socialist and modernization construction, (especially from the increasingly world global economy), the

state must carry out Chinese educational reform and development strategies. Curricula, teaching materials, instructional pedagogy, testing systems needed to be reformed because the emphasis on testing was no longer considered quality education (Zhang, 2000). Education needed to be tuned toward helping students acquire critical thinking skills, strong problem solving ability, good citizenship, high ethics, and other positive moral qualities. Students who were only able to score well in testing situations were not necessarily considered well-educated or economically competitive, and thus, might not be able to meet the demands and challenges from both national economic development and the world global economy (Zhang, 2000).

In areas where the nine-year compulsory basic education had been achieved, students continued to be overburdened with extra homework and school assignments, or were subject to a lengthy school day, while teachers and students were still under great pressure from testing and school promotion, and teaching and learning remained test-oriented (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998). So on May 16, 1995, the State Education Commission issued another *Circular on Further Promoting and Perfecting the Reform of Admission Policies for Secondary Middle Schools*. The report emphasized the necessity to deepen the reform of the admission policy for secondary middle schools. This reform was meant to help students complete a nine-year compulsory basic education, lighten school burden, and would help promote a quality education in elementary schools. In order to realize these goals, measures were taken to reduce the number of unified external tests, to reduce the number of contests in different subjects, and to reform curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy (The State Education Commission, 1995).

*High school testing.* Not surprisingly, the State Education Commission issued another circular to address high school education on June 8, 1995: *Circular of Proposals on Fully Promoting the Quality of General High Schools*. The Commission repeated that reforming the testing system (especially the college entrance examination policy) was the key to national educational reform. China had to reform testing, as well as curricula, teaching materials, instructional pedagogy, and the whole educational assessment system in high schools (The State Education Commission, 1995). These changes would help correct the tendency of testing-oriented education, would lighten students' school burden, and would improve educational quality. Quality education and educational assessment reform became dual priorities of educational reform in China (Zhang, 1997).

*Documented strategies toward a quality education.* In response to the educational assessment reforms in basic education, in the alignment with the changes of admission policies to colleges and universities in the 1990s, and to meet the increasing demands of the socialist market economy, higher education enrollment continued to expand in China (Yang, 2004). The central government agreed that the objectives of elementary and middle schools were not one-sidedly to prepare students for next level of education through increasing the promotion ratio. Because of this new mind-set and educational philosophy toward a quality education, the elementary and middle schools were encouraged and even forced to reform curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy (Man, 1997). For this purpose, the State Education Commission issued *Proposals on Actively Carrying out Quality Education in Elementary and Middle Schools* on October 29, 1997. The circular put forward a series of suggestions for promoting quality education and restated the significance of a quality education; it reiterated the

need for schools to shift basic education toward quality education; and it listed some of the negative consequences of test-oriented education on students, education, and society. The circular also provided some specific strategies for improvement, including the continuous reinforcement and deepening of educational reform in the areas of curricula, teaching materials, instructional pedagogy, and admission policies to a higher level of education (The State Education Commission, 1997).

In order to push educational reform forward, the State Education Commission on February 6, 1998, issued another circular: *Proposals on Carrying out Quality Education, Adjusting Curricula, and Reinforcing Teaching Administration in Elementary and Middle Schools*. The circular clearly stated that in order to achieve a quality education in basic education, educational bureaus and schools of all levels had to reform curricula, teaching contents, and instructional pedagogy. Quality education was of critical importance for both student well-rounded (全面 comprehensive/total) development, and for the national economic construction and development in terms of educational efficiency and effectiveness (The State Education Commission, 1993).

*Deepening quality education reform for China in 1999.* On June 18<sup>th</sup>, the Central Committee and the State Council issued *Decisions on Deepening and Reinforcing the Education Reform, and fully Promoting Quality Education*. The circular restated the need for college entrance examination reform. This change depended on the continuation of reform in the areas of testing subjects, testing contents, testing form, college admission policies, curriculum, and instructing pedagogy. This complex reform was expected to solve the chronic problems in education - school burden, one-sided pursuit of promotion

rate, and exam-oriented learning and instruction and was simultaneously meant to promote a quality education for national economic development and for the global economy (The Central Committee of CCP & The Ministry of Education, 1999).

*Reform policies in the new century.* In the new century, many policies regarding the educational assessment reform and quality education have been made or reinforced. Since 2001, the Central Committee, the State Council, and the Ministry of Education issued many circulars to guide the educational reform toward an improved educational quality. Among the most important ones were: *Circular of Guiding Principles on Curricula Reform in Basic Education* (06-08-2001) by the Ministry of Education, *State Council's Decision on Reforming and Developing Basic Education* (2001) by the State Council, *Circular of Directives on Reforming Basic Education and Educational Assessment* (08-16-2002) by the Ministry of Education, *The Central Committee's Decision on Many Issues to Perfect the Socialist Market Economy System* (2003) by the Central Committee, and *The Action Plan to Vitalize China's Education during 2003-2007* (2003) by the Central Committee. These policies continued to express the Chinese Communist Party's strong determination to reform China's educational assessment system, to check the tendency of one-sided pursuit of test scores and promotion rate, and to promote a quality education for national economic construction, social development, and a national competitiveness in the world's global economy.

From a brief review of the Chinese documents on educational assessment reform for an improved educational quality, it is obvious that authorities stressed and re-emphasized the following: lightening students' school burden, correcting the tendency of one sided pursuit of promotion rate to a higher level of schooling, reforming educational

assessment system, reforming curricula, reforming instruction contents, reforming instructional pedagogy, and promoting quality education. Despite the repetition of this discourse over so many years, the same problems continued. The analysis of this language and discourse will come in Chapter Three and Chapter Five.

## Documentation of American Education Reform Policies

### *Standard-based Reform*

In contrast to inadequate critiques on China's education reform policies from Chinese educators, the critiques on American education reform were more diversified and more critical. American educators and critics had varying understandings and perspectives on the direction of standard-based education reform. This document and policy review focused on the main critics who examined the reform from different aspects.

*History of failed reform.* Diane Ravitch, a historian of education, an educational policy analyst and policy advisor under Reagan and Bush, and former United States Assistant Secretary of Education, examined American education from a historical, social and political perspective in her books: *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen Guide* (1995), and *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reform* (2000). She agreed that educational standards and testing were necessary for American education if they were appropriately created, implemented, and used. She perceived that American education was influenced by many forces and was full of controversy.

Linda Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University, published articles since the 1990s on education standards, testing and accountability. Her neutral tone and insightful perspective were widely cited in

discussing the standard-based reform. Of her articles, several were reviewed in this research including, *The Implications of Testing Policy for Quality and Equity* (1991), *National Standards and Assessment: Will They Improve Education* (1994), and *Standards, Accountability, and School Reform* (2004).

*The business of school.* David Labaree, a professor from Stanford University, used the terms “credentialism” and “consumerism” in *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning* (1997), and *Education, Markets, and the Public Good* (2007) to introduce the idea that American education was being treated as a business and commodity. This belief and practice in education hurt American education and its students. The American school system as a marketplace was also presented in *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* by Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen.

*Social reform before educational reform.* In the American Context, David C. Berliner, a Regents’ professor in the College of Education at Arizona State University, and Bruce J. Biddle, a professor from University of Missouri, argued that the underachievement problem in American education was a “manufactured crisis” in *The Manufactured Crisis* (1985). Racial problems, rather than low standards and poor school performance, needed to be tackled first. In *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (2003), Jenifer Hochschild, a professor at Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and Nathan B. Scovronick, a professor at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, agreed that the policies designed to promote individual success in school likely benefited only those who were privileged

by race or class. They believed that American education reform needed to focus on social ills, rather than standards and testing.

*A Nation at Risk*

In comparison with the century-long history of the Chinese examination selection system in education, standardized testing has been in existence in the United States for not quite a century, and has been a controversial topic since the beginning, just as American education, in general, has always been a subject of heated debate (Long, 1984). In 1981, concern with poor school performance levels prompted President Reagan to mandate a special study in the responsibility of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. “The Year of the Great Debate” (1983) was the year about American education, in that it is the year that a large number of reports were published, each criticizing the public schools and calling for immediate reform. These publications included: *A Nation at Risk*, The Education Department’s Ernest Boyer’s *High School*, and *Making the Grade*. Among them, *A Nation at Risk* was the most widely known. *A Nation at Risk*, produced by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, charged that performance in the schools was so derelict that the nation itself was in danger (Long, 1984).

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world...The educational foundations of society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983 p. 5)



In the report, the National Commission notified the nation that American students demonstrated poor performance on international comparisons of academic achievement. American student scores on standardized tests and SAT scores had been declining for over twenty years; the American business community's increasing concern over declining quality of new employees from American high schools made the reform imperative (Kearn & Doyle, 1991; The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Bell, 1990).

The academic under-achievement caught national attention from the public, businesses, and the government for several reasons. According to Kosar (2005), a nation-state's economic prosperity and health is dependent on the educational levels of its citizens. He further pointed out that the health of the U.S. system of representative democracy was contingent on the education level of the citizenry and direct citizen involvement. The higher the educational attainment, the more probable it would be that a citizen would participate in the democratic activities. It was also evidenced that lower academic achievement was correlated with a host of social issues, including crime, poverty, and teenage pregnancy (Jenks & Phillips, 1998). Educational level has also been closely related to individual earning power. Education benefits both individuals and society in these respects (Labaree, 2007).

### *Standards of Performance*

Years of polling data also demonstrated that the public was particularly attracted to the idea of national educational standards and assessments (Jennings, 1998). Regardless of race, religion, or age, the public believed that education was critical to both individuals and a collective societal well-being (Tyrack & Cuban, 2006). Americans

agreed that the federal government should make efforts to improve education quality, and should define high education standards to improve public school education (Jennings, 1998; and Kosar, 2005). To judge whether a school is effective and efficient or not, most parents, school teachers, and administrators used student proficiency test scores (Ravitch, 1995). Tax levies, home purchasing, and other important decisions, were dependent on the success of a school district, which could be linked to student test scores.

Sparked by the publishing of *A Nation at Risk*, an initiative for national education standards developed. American policy-makers believed that American education would be improved by creating high academic standards for student achievement and by measuring progress toward achievement through standardized tests (Jennings, 1998). Policy-makers suggested that standards-based educational reform in the U.S. should adhere to the following four principles (Linn, 1990; Smith & O' Day, 1990): both content standards and performance standards must be set high enough to challenge most students; content standards must be specific and should clearly stipulate the general capabilities and subject content that a student must master; performance standards must measure student mastery of the content standards absolutely (in criterion-referenced exams), not relatively (in norm-referenced exams); and finally, these standards must apply to *all* students, with only exceptions of those with substantial learning or behavioral disabilities.

Like the Chinese central government, most American policy-makers believed that reforming educational assessment was a critical part of educational reform. However, the direction of the U.S. educational reform was in great contrast to China's de-emphasis on competitive testing. U.S. policy-makers wanted to increase the significance of testing, so

as to hold students, teachers, districts, and schools accountable for an improved educational quality (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

After *A Nation at Risk*, many states increased high-school graduation requirements by adding more academic core courses, with emphasis on mathematics, science, history, and foreign language (Kirst, 1988). Many states strengthened statewide student-assessment programs designed to measure pupil academic progress (Jennings, 1995). In contrast to the Chinese educational reform philosophy, which was aimed at restructuring or to decentralizing the system (Cheng, 2004), at this stage, the American people still thought that the existing system of education was rudimentarily sound; simply adding more accountability, more tests, more academic rigor, more time in the classroom, and more requirements for professional certification would make changes possible (Koppich & Guthie, 1993).

#### *Goals 2000: Educate America*

Since the advent of *A Nation at Risk*, other national actions affecting education quality and targeting competitive educational standards have been implemented. President George H. W. Bush endorsed the agenda of the nation's governors in supporting *America 2000*, and the later President William J. (Bill) Clinton expanded it to *Goals 2000: Educate America*, which was enacted into law in 1994. Both presidential initiatives attempted to address particular weaknesses in the public schools, and tried to raise educational standards in the public schools by focusing on national goals that would be expected by the end of the decade.

According to Kessinger (2005), the impetus of *America 2000* (1991) essentially reiterated several earlier educational pronouncements: "the schools were in need of a

revolution, school people would have to be held accountable for their results, the schools were destined to become learning communities, and students within them should prepare for ‘lifelong learning’ in a knowledge-economy time” (p.6). The goals of *America 2000* echoed the essentials found earlier in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) regarding international competitiveness and rigorous educational standards.

*America 2000* was founded on six educational goals identified by Bush (Sr.):

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including, English, mathematics, science, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S. students will be the first in the world in science and math achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will process the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. (Department of Education: *America 2000*, p. 19)

A general aim of essentialism, or to educate “the useful and competent person,” is found in the above goals (Kessinger, 2005). These goals also reflect the rigorous

educational standards for American education: the graduation rate will increase, students will possess competency in selected subjects and will excel in math and science, students will use their minds well to become more responsible citizens, and students will be able to compete in the international arena.

According to Urban and Wagoner (2004), President Clinton (and former Governor of Arkansas) in his *Goals 2000*, added two notions to Bush's six national goals: namely, "parental involvement in education and programs for improving the professional education of teachers" (p. 363). In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, consisting of the eight aforementioned goals; this was published as *the National Education Goals*. Kasper (2004) noted that with the act, "an educational standards-based school reform concept achieved acceptance at the national level" (p. 1). The objective of the *Goals 2000* act was to create an educated citizenry, that was well-trained and responsible, capable of adapting to a changing world, knowledgeable about cultural heritage and the world community, and willing to accept and maintain America's leadership in the twenty-first century" (pp. 408-409).

#### *The No Child Left Behind Act*

Ornstein and Levine (2006) mentioned that, in 2001, the National Education Goals Panel made its final and major report on the progress of the eight goals. Despite the fact that the nation did not meet the national goals by the year 2000 (or in 2000), "many states made remarkable progress" during this period (p. 409). A year later, the Panel was suspended in light of the signing into law of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Then, another set of educational goals was advanced and reinforced.

The legislation of *No Child Left Behind* (2001) helped to continue the progress of reform by the national government. Secretary of Education Ronald Paige (2002) stated, “The No Child Left Behind law heralds a major change in direction for American schools” and “helps us look at schools, governance, and the federal role in education in the right way” (p. 710). In spite of the ongoing debate about the merits and demerits of this legislative enactment, the national government has increased requirements on the states and therefore, has continued its role as a major influence on public education policies and reforms (Kessinger, 2005).

The *No Child Left Behind Act* reinforced educational reform with rigorous education standards for Americans; by holding school administration, school teachers, and students accountable for an improved educational quality; and by empowering parents with school choice for their children (Mc Guinn, 2006). Under *No Child Left Behind*, each state established a definition of "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) to use each year to determine the achievement of each school district and school. It granted parents school choice for their children if the local school failed to make progress after corrective action. For educational accountability and educational standard, *No Child Left Behind* required that local education agencies “review annually the progress of each school served under this part to determine whether the school is meeting, or making adequate progress as defined in section 111(b)(2)(A)(i) toward enabling its students to meet the State’s student performance standards described in the State plan (1116(b)(2)).”

*No Child Left Behind* was standard-based reform legislation that included three types of standards: content standards, performance standards, and opportunity-to-learn standards.

Each State plan shall demonstrate that the State has adopted challenging academic content standards and challenging student academic achievement standards that will be used by the State, its local educational agencies, and its schools to carry out this part, except that a State shall not be required to submit such standards to the Secretary. (Section 1111(b)(1)(A))

The *No Child Left Behind Act* also empowered parents as consumers in three ways: First, it required states and local education agencies to provide parents with easily understood information about student and school performance (1116a). Second, it granted parents of children in failing schools the right to intra-district public school choice (1116b). And third, it required local education agencies to grant parents of children in failing schools the right and power to choose among supplementary educational service providers for their children (1116e).

With *No Child Left Behind*, more federal influence was evident. Accountability pressures at both the state and local levels had school officials and teachers focusing on improving test scores in reading and mathematics, on helping students pass proficiency tests, and on ensuring that every child has a “highly qualified teacher” in the classroom, so that students could meet the educational standards set up by the state (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

#### *Documented Controversy over Change in the U.S.*

Since the 1980s, raising educational standards to improve student achievement has remained popular in educational reform for the U.S. (Ravitch, 1995). However, the use of federal power directly to raise educational standards in public education remains politically problematic and openly argumentative (Jennings, 1998). Some educators and

critics believed that although they were indirect and less robust than true national standards, the continuing standards-raising efforts - as embodied in the 1994 and 2002 reforms of *Title I* - were valuable (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Kosar, 2005; O' Day, 1995). *Title I* refers to the *Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965, and was amended in *No Child Left Behind Act* as "improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged." The purpose of this title is to ensure that *all* children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. These standards-based reforms pushed states to implement a standards-based system of accountability (Kosar, 2005; Ravitch, 1995). These reforms also demonstrated how eager and determined the federal government was in directing the educational reform; it showed the government's attempt at promoting a quality education for *all* U.S. children (Jenning, 1998). Other educators held that "standards" actually geared teacher instructing and student learning toward the standards and toward testing, which consequently affected the quality and equity of education (Jones, G., Jones B. & Hargrove, 2003; Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000; Merrow, 2001; Ohanian, 1999; Popham, 2004; Sandhotz, Ogawa & Scribner, 2004).

As a result, this series of standards-based educational reforms triggered continuing debates among different interest groups, despite the fact that nearly everyone was in favor of high quality schooling. On one side of the debate were the national educational standards advocates, and on the other side were the liberals and anti-statist politicians and educators (Kosar, 2005). Liberals and anti-statists opposed state intervention in personal, economic, educational, and social affairs. They believed that education was a local issue (Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005; Ravitch, 1995). The debates



developed around the following points: the desirability and feasibility of creating national standards and examinations; the philosophical question as to the extent of federal power and local control; educational equity concerns; the causes of school underachievement, and the correlations between underachievement and educational standards (Mc Guinn, 2006; Ravitch, 2005). Traditionally controlled by the local and state government, the liberals and anti-statists insisted that education should remain in the hands of communities and state government, and that the federal government should stay away from educational issues. The liberals and anti-statists suggested that the underachievement of American students was largely a result of insufficient school resources and student socio-economic circumstances. Consequently, in order to improve school achievement, the federal government must provide more funding for resources and compensatory education (Jenning, 1998; Kosar, 2005; Ravitch, 1995), instead of requiring under-funded mandatory national standards for schooling.

On the other hand, the national standards advocates emphasized the behavior of the schools as an organization (Ravitch, 1995) and wanted government regulation. They insisted that higher educational standards were critical in raising student achievement, and further believed that resources were not irrelevant to student achievement.

Educational standards advocates did not resist the standards-based educational reform (Kosar, 2005). They proposed that the federal government increase requirements on the states, which would allow them to continue to be a major influence on public education policies and on setting up rigorous national educational standards while promoting school achievement (Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005; Ravitch, 1995). The debates also continued among other groups who held different educational philosophies regarding educational

standards, learning, testing, and teaching. For example, some groups agreed with testing and standards reform, while others who favored constructivist reform believed that high-stakes testing was detrimental to student learning and development (Popham, 2004). Regardless of these differentiated perspectives of standards-based education reform, the U.S. reform has moved toward standards and tests.

So many educators were against standards-based reform in the U.S. Gail M. Jones, Brett D. Jones, and Tracy Y. Hargroves carefully studied, through multiple lenses, the results of high-stakes testing on students, teachers, parents, community and American society in *The Untended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing* (2003). Some educators presented concerns over the unintended consequences of increased testing and unified educational standards; these reforms would have an impact on students, teachers, curricula, learning and teaching, education, and society, and they could be easily misinterpreted (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Graves, 2002; Hillocks, 2002; Klein, Hamilton, McCarffery, & Stetcher, 2000; Koretz & Barron, 1998; Koretz, Linn, Dunba, & Shepard, 1991; Linn, 2000; Linn, Graue, & Sanders, 1990; Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000; Merrow, 2001; Ohanian, 1999; Popham, 2004; Sandhotz, Ogawa & Scribner, 2004; Shanker, 1995; Sizer, 1995; Stetcher, Barron, Kagaoff, & Goodwin, 1998; Stewart, 1995).

However, some educators believed that education standards and tests of proficiency would help to improve school performance to ensure an improved education quality, if they were appropriately applied. They agreed that such standards and testing procedures would enable comparisons to be made between schools and across districts (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Finn, 1995; Mitchell, 1992; Porter, 1995; Ravitch, 1995;

Resnick & Nolan, 1995; Resnick & Resnick, 1982; Romer, 1995; Smith, 1995; and Tucker & Coddington, 1998). Different interpretations of the educational standards and the increased testing in public schools depended on the different understandings of these issues.

Some critics looked into this standards-based reform from a political, economical, cultural, and social perspective. Michael Apple, a professor of curriculum and instruction and educational policy at University of Wisconsin-Madison, explored the resurgence of the conservative restoration in the U.S., and examined how the social, political, economic, and cultural movements on the right succeeded in forming a “hegemonic alliance” in order to influence and shape educational policies in the United States. In his *“Creating Difference: Neo-Liberalism, Neo-Conservatism and the Politics of Educational Reform”* (2004), Apple also described “how different interests with educational and social visions competed for the dominion in the social field of power surrounding educational policy and practice” (p. 12). This difference in interpreting markets, choice, national curricula, national testing, accountability, and standards brought the debate in education policy between the neo-liberals and neo-conservatives.

The process of policy-making in congress was somehow described by Kevin R. Kosar and John F. Jennings in their books, respectively: *Failing Grades: The Federal Politics of Education Standards* (2005), and *Why National Standards and Tests? Politics and the Quest for Better Schools* (1998). Kosar, an analyst at the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, concluded that “standards” – including, content, performance and opportunity-to-learn - were the solution to the problem of low achievement. Jennings traced the evolution of national standards from the Education

Summit to *Goals 2000*, and further identified the relevant House, Senate, and conference committee and subcommittee votes on each piece of legislation.

The current study seeks to evaluate the implications of the standards-based educational reform and the increased testing practices in American education, so the literature review focused on four important policy documents: *A Nation at Risk* (1983), *America 2000* (1991), *Goals 2000 (Educate America Act, 1994)*, and the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002).

### Research Questions

An analysis of the history and documentation of educational reform in China and the U.S. has led to a number of questions that remain unanswered. It is the interest of this researcher to discover additional meaning, similarities, and differences in the primary and secondary policy reform documents for both nations. Therefore, the hypothesis of this study is that the education reforms in the two nation-states are meant to improve the quality of public education for *all* children, so that education is able to best serve the nation's economic development and other needs in an increasing global context. If this is the aim, then what are the different approaches that these two societies should take to achieve a quality education in the global context? Why has the U.S. moved toward embracing testing assessment while the Chinese government intended to back away from it in policy-making, even though both nations participate in the same global economy? And how would they represent convergence or divergence in their respective educational reform? After twenty years of effort, did the two nations accomplish their goals? What are the implications of the policy-making processes and the policy implementation in the two societies?

## Methodological Context, Theory, and Support

### *Globalization as a Context for Understanding*

In order to gain a better understanding of the political, economic, and social context of reform for each nation-state, a review of theory and support is critical. Specifically, Martin Carnoy and Nelly Stromquist are relied on for the concept of globalization most heavily in this comparative education research. Martin Carnoy, a leading researcher in globalization, stated that, “National education has been significantly affected by globalization” (2000, p. 58). These influences are mainly expressed through educational policy-making and implementation “at the national level in the context of a globalized economy” (2000, p. 58). According to Stromquist, “Globalization is a multi-domain and multi-level phenomenon” (2002, p. 1). Globalization carries multiple dimensions --- economic, technological, political, and cultural (Stromquist, 2002). These aspects interact with each other and affect the “ways that the kinds of knowledge are created, assigned merit, and distributed” (p. 3).

Globalization, on the one hand, is a term that is too broad and too ambiguous to be used without problem in the interpreting of “the effects on the national education system by the structures and processes, institutions, and practices” (Dale & Robertson, 2002, p. 10). “It is both an extremely complex process that operates at many different levels with different effects” and “a powerful and far from monolithic discourse that is used to interpret changes in contemporary society” (p. 10). Globalization, on the other hand, can simply “refer to reforms and structures that transcend national borders” (Astiz, Wiseman & Baker, 2002, p. 66). It is understood that “globalization also implies both global processes and global outcomes” (Stromquist, 2002, p. 4). Globalization is

characterized as “a process that involves the institutional influences of multinational organizations as much as it does the economic investments of transnational corporations” (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002, p. 7).

Globalization increasingly appears to be a driving “force reorganizing the world’s economy”, and the main resources for the global economy are “increasingly knowledge and information” (pp. 1-2). Knowledge and information, “transmitted and shaped mainly by national and local institutions,” are essential to the development of the global economy. The global economy, in turn, impacts the nature of educational opportunities and institutions, and on the transmission of knowledge (p. 2). “The combination of economic restructuring in the world economy and the powerful ideological conceptions of how educational delivery needs to be changed, spread by international institutions as a consequence of the globalization process, was having a significant impact on educational systems worldwide” (p. 2). Martin Carnoy (2000) stated that globalization influenced education in three crucial ways: educational funding, education for the labor market, and educational curriculum and measurement. Globalization has particularly produced emphasis on teaching science and mathematics and on educational measurement. Globalization also increased the emphasis on standards, on testing, and on meeting standards through education reform (2000).

*Globalization effects on China.* Regarding the approach of China’s education reform, globalization might not be a sufficient or complete interpretation for “the different guises that national assessment systems have assumed across nations” (Benveniste, 2002, p. 93). Unlike the global education reform trend which moved towards the testing, China’s education reform seemed to move away from testing and

testing-oriented education. Despite the different approaches, the goal of the reform was similar, which was to improve school performance for a quality education. Situated in a long tradition of testing in education, the Chinese leadership learned that although some educational assessments are necessary, testing-oriented education is not a quality education and could not adequately prepare competitive labor for global economy. China chose a different approach toward achieving a quality education; this approach was aimed at reducing the number of tests, reducing the significance of testing in the assessment of both students and teachers, and adding additional alternative assessments while encouraging creative instruction and learning.

*Globalization effects on the U.S.* In contrast to China's lessons from the chronic test-oriented problem in education, the U.S. did not experience perceptions of a student burden due to testing. So the U.S. education leaders, in alignment with a global trend, believed that both students and teachers did not work hard enough to meet the challenges from a global economy. Policy-makers argued that a national --- or at least a state - assessment system was necessary for obtaining national education standards for a competitive world economy. The educational assessment reform was key in the drive toward greater quality, equity, and efficiency in the global society.

#### *Discourse Theory – Understanding Language*

This study of education policy in China and the United States is situated in a global trend of education reform, with discourse analysis as a research method. Discourse analysis stems from structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics, and it is based on a reworked understanding of structuralist Marxism (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). The discourse analysis approach is also based on constructivism. Discourse Theory stems

from “the post-structuralist idea that discourse constructs the social world in meaning,” and because of “the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 6). People’s access to reality is through language and written words (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). With language and through discourse, people “create representations of reality that are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality but contribute to constructing reality” (pp. 8-9). Discourse is not “a closed entity,” but rather, it is “constantly being transformed through contact with other discourses” (p. 7).

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), discourse theory attempts to help people understand society as a “discursive construction” (As cited in Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 24). Jorgensen and Phillips further stated that, “all social phenomena can be analyzed through discourse analytical tools” (2002, p. 7). The fundamental idea of discourse theory is that “social phenomena are never finished or total” and theoretically, “meaning can never be ultimately fixed” (p. 24). As a social phenomenon, it “is through conventions, negotiations, and conflicts in social contexts that structures of meaning are fixed and challenged” (p. 25). Laclau and Mouffe insisted that in the understanding of texts, “everything is contingent” (p. 54). All “discourses and articulations,” and “all aspects of the social existence could have been different, or can become different” (p. 54). Conflict and struggle are generators for new meanings in discourse negotiations: “In the discourse theoretical perspective, conflict and struggle pervade the social, and the struggle becomes an important focus in specific analysis” (p. 47). The continuing social struggles about definitions of society and identity generate more changes and negotiations, which result in social consequences in turn (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).



Discourse theorists believe that “our knowledge of the world should not be treated as objective truth” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5) in that “our knowledge and representation of the world are not straight reflections of the reality”, and our reflections of the reality are rather “products of our ways of categorizing the world”, or the products of discourse (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985, as cited in Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). According to theorists who practice discourse analysis, “We are fundamentally historical and cultural beings and our views of, and knowledge about the world, are the ‘products of historically situated interchanges among people’” (Gergen, 1985, p. 267, as cited in Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). In accordance, our understandings of the world are historically and culturally specific and contingent; “Our worldviews and our identities could have been different and could change over time” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). Regarding the interaction between social action and the understanding of the reality, theorists also suggest that, “Discourse is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world - including knowledge, identities, and social relations - and in maintaining specific patterns” (p. 5). The social world is constructed socially and discursively. The character of the social world is not pre-given or determined by external conditions in that people in a social world do not possess a set of fixed and authentic characteristics or essences (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). An individual’s understanding of the world is created and maintained by social processes (Burr, 1995, p. 4; Gergen, 1985, p. 268; and Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). Knowledge is consequently “created through social interaction” in which the participants “construct common truths and compete about what is true and what is false” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). From a discourse perspective, “different social understandings of the world lead to different

social actions”, and thereby the social construction of knowledge and truth is loaded with social consequences (Burr, 1995, p. 5; Gergen, 1985, pp.268 - 269; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 6).

Therefore, Discourse Theory posits that “language is not a reflection of pre-existing reality,” but rather, “language is structured in patterns or discourses” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 12). From a post-structuralism perspective, “there is not one general system of meaning but a series of systems or discourses, whereby meanings change from discourse to discourse” (p. 12). The negotiations about the meanings of the reality is “maintained and transformed in discursive patterns” (p. 12), and “the maintenance and transformation of the patterns are explored through an analysis of the specific contexts in which language is in action” (p. 12). Hence, in this study the author intends to look closely at the discursive patterns contained in major school reform documents; the author will analyze the patterns that are present in the documents and look for discursive patterns that are conflicting across the documents from the different countries of focus.

### Research Methods

Within an explanatory framework of discourse analysis, globalization, and through documentary studies of the principal educational assessment policies and changes in the two nation-states, this research will attempt to uncover the forces that were driving the national educational assessment reform in both China and U.S. since the 1980s, to interpret the implications of the two reforms for an improved educational quality, and to provide references for their respective efforts in pursuit of a quality education for a global competition.

### *Primary and Secondary Document Review*

In order to answer the research questions, the main documents associated with educational reforms since the 1980s were reviewed. The focus of the Chinese educational reform was on modifications of the three entrance examinations - the entrance examination for secondary middle school education, the entrance examination for secondary high school education, and the entrance examination for higher education (also known as college/university entrance examination). The three crucial documents on Chinese education reform - *Decision of the CCP Central Committee on the Reform of the Educational System* (The Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, 1985), *Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development* (The State Council, 1993), and *Decisions on Deepening the Education Reform, and fully Promoting Quality Education* (The Central Committee and the State Council, 1999) were closely studied. The document study of China's education reform also included the sixteen circulars and directives issued by the Ministry of Education since the 1980s, and a review of the published works by the main critics on this education reform. These documents were originally in the Chinese language; so part of the method in this research was to translate the documents into English in the course of the reading and analysis. This verbal and written translation process was critical in the understanding of specific and unique cultural language that is critical in discourse analysis.

The focus of the U.S. education reform since the 1980s was on the standards-based efforts to improve school performance. The principal documents - *A Nation at Risk*, *America 2000*, *Goals 2000: Educate America*, and *No Child Left Behind* were closely studied. The influential education critiques on education standards and

accountability were also carefully reviewed. These documents were originally in English and were translated into Chinese --- the researcher's native language --- in the course of reading and analysis. This translation was completed in order to achieve a better understanding of the documents.

### *Critical Examination of Documents*

*Identifying themes.* Each relevant document was read three times, initially for overall content and a holistic understanding of the principles and key points, then re-read and analyzed for major themes, and read a third time for further understanding of minor themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). From the initial analysis of major themes in each document, key words were identified and minor themes were discovered within these categories. These minor themes were analyzed as well, primarily with regard to how the themes were organized, and how they were similar or different across the documents within each nation- state. Themes were further analyzed for similarities and disparities between the two different nation-states.

*Identifying forces that influenced the documents.* In order to understand the themes, this researcher needed to gain a better understanding of the social, political, and historical forces that helped to shape the previous and existing educational policies, the reform efforts, the goals of the changes, and the culture as a whole. This researcher analyzed the documents in terms of context and the larger picture that influenced the initiation of the documents, as well as the social factors that impacted the implementation of the new policies within the nation-states.

The different approaches employed toward achieving a quality education in the two societies indicated that national politics played a central role in the local system

configuration (Benveniste, 2002). Understanding the political dimensions of assessment was essential in the interpretation of the variant models of assessment in the different societies. Without an understanding of the culture, society, and history, document review would be ineffective and incomplete.

*Interpretation of language.* Through an analysis of the reform documents, this researcher attempted to uncover the meaning of the reform through an analysis of tone, word choice, language, focus, and content. This researcher wanted to understand the motivation behind the documents and the politics associated with the target reform efforts; motivations were obvious in the repetitive use of words, topics, and phrases in the two reforms. Phrases that were consistent throughout the Chinese and American documents included, for China, lightening students' school burden, correcting the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher level of schooling, testing oriented education, and promoting quality education. For the U.S., competitive education standards, educational excellence, and accountability were recurring phrases. These were just a few of the words that were consistent throughout the documents for each nation-state. It was clear that the language was heavily dependent on measuring national success with assessment, social responsibility for the future of the nation-state, and fierce competition in the global economy. In addition to the language that was used to highlight key initiatives, the way that these topics were discussed and approached offers important information about the motivations and direction of the reform.

#### *Analyzing Primary Documents: Similarities and Differences*

Additionally, this researcher needed to compare and contrast the goals and opinions from the documents within each reform, and between the documents from the

two nation's reforms. To do this portion of the document analysis, this researcher used the identified themes, the historical and social contexts, and the analysis of critical language to understand how the policies in each nation-state evolved and were implemented. Also important to this research was how the policies of the U.S. and China were similar and different in the approach and progress toward the goals of education reform. Primarily, the focus on testing, assessment, grade promotion, school burden, accountability, and quality education, were the themes used to compare and contrast the policies of the two nation-states. The policies of the U.S. and China were analyzed for similarities and differences on several different levels, and with regard to various topics and ideas.

#### *Analyzing Secondary Documents: Validating Government Documents*

In order to gather a better understanding of how the government educational reform documents were accepted by the people in the two nation-states, this researcher also analyzed secondary documents that offered criticism and support for the initial analysis. These secondary documents were the main sources of understanding the consequences and outcomes of the education reforms in the two nation-states. The same process of reading, re-reading, and reading a third time was applied to the analysis of these documents. As with the primary documents, this reading process uncovered new themes, confirmed existing information, and allowed for educational criticisms and social responses to be translated, analyzed, compared, and contrasted.

## Method Choice

### *Cultural Comparative Study*

A cultural comparative study has the potential of being expensive and time-consuming; this was the primary reason for choosing document study as the method for this research. Generally speaking, access to these documents and records is relatively easy and low cost; these texts also endure, contain, and thus denote historical insights (Hodder, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, Ed., 2000, p. 704).

This research was designed to discover the driving forces, the goals, and the implications of the two education reforms in the two distinct nation-states; conclusions were discovered and drawn through the process of discourse analysis --- a study of specific language, themes, and contexts that help to shape narrative. In the process of the discourse analysis, globalization was applied to understand the causes of the emerging reform efforts in China and the U.S. In the analysis of the documents and the critiques of China's education reform, the "key points" of the main documents were presented chronologically, since the reinstatement of the college/university entrance examination in 1977. Themes, such as standards, accountability, school burden, promotion ratio, quality education, etc. are analyzed within the context of globalization. The analysis included only "key points", and many themes were introduced, but left open for the reader's interpretation; this researcher agrees that "we are fundamentally historical and cultural beings and our views of, and knowledge about the world, are the 'products of historically situated interchanges among people'" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267, cited by Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). Our understandings of the world are historically and culturally

specific and contingent; and "our world views and our identities could have been different and could change over time" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5).

### *Document Analysis*

In the process of the document analysis, the document might also speak to the audience in different ways. However, these documents were carefully selected so that they were able to convincingly answer the research questions and agree or dispute the research hypothesis. Personal knowledge of this analysis might not necessarily be an "objective truth" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5) in that "our knowledge and representation of the world are not straight reflections of the reality", and our reflections of the reality are rather "products of our ways of categorizing the world", or the products of discourse (Burr, 1995 & Gergen, 1985, cited by Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5). Furthermore, "language is not a reflection of pre-existing reality, but rather, language is structured in patterns or discourses" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 12). Therefore, the negotiations of the meanings of these documents are "maintained and transformed in discursive patterns" (p.12), and "the maintenance and transformation of the patterns are explored through analysis of the specific contexts in which language is in action" (p. 12). This analysis will continue in the process of reading this research.

In the process of the document analysis on the education reforms in the two nation-states, several themes emerged and were repeated over and over including "student school burden," "one-sided pursuit of promotion ratio to a higher level schooling," "test-oriented education," "quality education," "education standards," "accountability," and "globalization." These words were studied and analyzed for tone,



relevance in the unique political and social context, consistency across documents, and comparisons within and across the two nation-states.

In order to make the analysis manageable, the critical documents of the two educational reforms were presented separately in two different chapters. After an analysis of the documents in each nation-state, the themes began to emerge, then were compared and contrasted. Tentative conclusions were made regarding the similarities and disparities of the driving forces behind the two education reforms, the purpose of policy-making, the approaches toward a quality education, and implications of the policy-making and policy implementation.

CHAPTER THREE:  
CHINESE EDUCATION POLICY REFORM:  
FROM TEST-ORIENTED EDUCATION TO QUALITY EDUCATION

Educational and Testing in the Old China Before 1949

China's testing system in education originated from a merit system for the selection of officials for the government, which dated back to 165 B.C. (Teng, 1966). From a system of recommendation and examination, the *Civil Service Exam* evolved (Keju 科举), which was an open and competitive examination system; the exam was officially established in the Sui dynasty (581-618). The Civil Service Exam was abolished in 1905 and soon after, the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) eventually collapsed in 1911 (Teng, 1966).

Despite some modifications in forms of the exam during this long time, the purposes and contents of the exam remained largely the same. The goals of the Civil Service Exam were to set specific standards and it was used to select scholars to fill government positions according to these standards. The purposes were to limit the power of the nobility, and to promote the Confucian ideal of hierarchical order, moral governance, loyalty, submissiveness to authority, and social harmony (Teng, 1966). The contents of the exam focused on the candidates' understanding of several important

subjects, including “knowledge of nine classic texts of Confucian philosophy and history called the *Four Books and Five Classics* (Sishu Wujing 四书五经), on poetry, on the writing of official documents, and on national policy issues” (Suen & Yu, 2006, p. 49). Suen and Yu (2006) believed that the Civil Service Exam that was traditionally practiced in China was a high-stakes test, which focused primarily on test-taking skills and test scores. As a result, there were some unintended consequences from these tests, such as rote memorization, cheating, and some psychological and behavioral problems. Such problems helped to define the deficiencies of contemporary high-stakes testing.

From the very beginning, Chinese education has been closely connected with the competitive examination, which was designed to select officials for government. Success on the examination brought respect, power, money, and honor to the candidate and his family. According to Suen and Vu (2006), the exam was so selective at the end of Qing dynasty that only one candidate per million candidates could go through all three levels of exams to be selected as *jinshi* (advanced scholar, 进士) - the highest level of scholarship at that time. The importance of education is embodied in an old Chinese saying, “There are houses made of gold and beautiful women in books (书中自有黄金屋, 书中自有美人颜)”. This means that if one studied hard, and succeeded in passing those three levels of selective exams, then he would be rewarded with a government position. Prior to 1949, this reward for study with civil service positions was reserved only for men. The three exams included the local district-prefecture exam for *xiucai* (秀

才; cultivated talent), the provincial exam for *juren* (举人; elevated scholar), and the metropolitan exam and palace exam for *jinshi* (进士; advanced scholar) (Suen & Yu, 2006). Government positions were especially valued because they “bestowed financial rewards, prestige, power, fame, and many advantages to the official’s entire extended family and ancestry” (p. 48). Each position corresponded with privileges and responsibilities. The three levels of honors correspond roughly to the Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees in the American education system - *xiucai* (秀才), *juren* (举人), and *jinshi* (进士) (Teng, 1966).

The long tradition of the Civil Service Exam forcefully influenced the Chinese people’s concept of education and the perspectives on the value of education: besides serving the country, more importantly, education could bring personal accomplishment and honor to the family through success in exams. The Civil Service Exam was abolished in 1905 by the Qing government in that China was confronted with both internal strives and outside invasion from western powers. Reformers expected to build up a powerful China through establishing a new education system that focused on science, technology, and western civilization.

The Chinese Communist Party continued the education of science and technology, but also emphasized the ideology that education needed to be accessible to the working class people. This ideology was practiced since the end of the 1920s until 1949 in “red areas” controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. The main purpose of mass

education was to indoctrinate the Chinese people with socialism and communism so as to consolidate the communist regime in China.

### Red China and the Four Modernizations (1950s - 1960s)

#### *Mass Education and Elite Education*

After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Chinese Communist leaders needed to make a balance between mass education and an elite education when education resources were in a desperate scarcity. Meanwhile, China also desperately needed thousands of engineers and specialists to reconstruct and develop socialist China.

In the 1950s and the early 1960s, the "Red" China was isolated from and threatened by the developed powers in the world (especially by those in the western hemisphere), and therefore, attempted to industrialize the nation for survival. In order to catch up with the nations who were more developed with regard to industry, agriculture, defense, science, and technology, the Chinese government identified another term to describe the national goal - "four modernizations."

#### *Four Modernizations*

The term "four modernizations" was first used by the former Premier Zhou Enlai in the Government Work Report at the Third National People's Congress first meeting on December 21, 1964 (Cao, 2006). In his Government Work Report, Premier Zhou referred to the "four modernizations" as China's 4 prolonged strategic goals "to build China into a powerful socialist nation with modernized industry, modernized agriculture, modernized defense, and modernized science and technology" (*The Selected Works of Zhou Enlai on Economy*, 1993, p. 563). The Chinese Communist Party was well aware that the key to

modernizing China was to develop science and technology, which was dependent on a quality education, leading to scientific and technological expertise. The Chinese Communist Party's ambition to build China into a powerful socialist nation was interrupted by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1977)

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a radical reform in China initiated by Mao Zedong in 1966. It was a strategy used in political power struggle, and it was also a political experiment used by Mao Zedong to carry out his ideology for a mass political education in China. It was carried out largely by the Red Guard - college students, secondary school students and the other young people. The Great Cultural Revolution intended to eliminate counter-revolutionary elements in the socialist government and it resulted in purges of the intellectuals and officials, and caused socioeconomic chaos nationally for about 10 years.

#### *Social, Political, and Economic Influences on Educational Decisions and Policies*

*Socio-cultural ideals and influence.* For over 1300 years, Chinese people have, culturally, valued education, but really only as a process of preparation for the examination; Chinese people view education as a way to achieve social and corresponding economic mobility. In China, education is not necessarily valued as a process to further intellect and to learn, but rather it has been consistently valued for the benefits that success on exams can provide. However, many people who pursued education and success in exams were not only for their personal material being, but also desired to serve the country. Culturally, Chinese intellectuals were educated to be loyal and dedicated to their nation and people. This traditional value made them sacrifice their personal interests for the nation in necessary. These people were well respected and

remembered since then, specifically because of the efforts these leaders had made to improve the country. Yue Fei (1103-1142) and Xin Qiji (1140-1207), the two generals in Song Dynasty (960-1279), were heroes who fought for their country to the last breath. They were great heroes of patriotism and loyalty to the government and the people, and were respected in China. The traditional education system was not discontinued until the beginning of the twentieth century when the old semi-feudal and semi-colonial China was threatened by the western powers' invasion. Before 1949, China's education reform was heavily influenced by western education, especially by Japanese education and American education. The Chinese government at that time sent Chinese students to the western countries to study, with an expectation that these students could rebuild China into a powerful nation when they returned.

When the new China was established in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party leaned to the socialist Soviet Union to counter back the hostility from the Western block. The former Soviet Union's education had a big influence on the new China's higher education in the 1950s in curriculum, instructional contents, instructional pedagogy, and educational assessment. During this period of time, China, like the former Soviet Union, focused on engineering, technology and science in higher education. This new socialist education foundation and system could be attributed to the modern education model imported from western countries (1905-1949), and the socialist education of the former Soviet Union (Yuan, 1999, p.16).

*Political influence.* The political doctrine and mentality that any decision or action about education policy was solely determined by its contribution to overall utility - the socialist construction - used to be the decisive force in educational policy-making in the

New China. In the other words, education was used as an important means to achieving both political and economic goals for the new government (Yang, 2003). Apart from the traditional value of education held by the Chinese leaders that education was a powerful tool to consolidate the sovereignty by reinforcing the public's obedience and social harmony, the Chinese Communist Party also used education to achieve the national economic goals so as to build China into a powerful socialist country.

*Economic influence and globalization.* One of the factors that attributed to this political doctrine was that China used to be a poverty-stricken country with a large population. In an attempt to reinforce its power through education, the Chinese Communist Party indoctrinated the political ideology onto Chinese people; this occurred during the first five years after power was taken from the former nationalist party in October of 1949. Simultaneously the Chinese Communist Party also attempted to develop the economy, science, and technology in order to build China into a powerful nation. On the one hand, mass education was necessary to indoctrinate the people ideologically with political thoughts. Yet China was too poor to afford a quality education for all people. On the other hand, China embarked on an expensive educational program to create elites for socialist construction. China's socialist construction required many highly educated engineers and experts; this meant that elite education was the best and fastest way to train the talent for the socialist construction (Gu & Liu, 1994). China's education policy-making was also influenced the global political atmosphere. After the Second World War, the world was divided by two blocks represented by the former Socialist Soviet Union and the U.S. respectively. China, a new socialist nation, was inevitably categorized



in the Soviet Union block, and the hostile atmosphere and cold war gave the new China no other alternatives but laid the focus on national construction and development.

Historically, China's new education system reflected Chinese government's determination to revitalize China's power through education reform since the 1870s. The efforts of the People's Republic are an extension of this 19<sup>th</sup> century determination. From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China's supremacy had collapsed, and coastal China was invaded by the western powers. With the foreign invasion, China's traditional education was seriously challenged by the western education philosophies and ideologies, which accelerated the abolishment of the Civil Service Exam system in 1905, and brought up many new schools with western educational ideologies.

#### Educational Reform and Policy Implementation in the New China (1949-1966)

Because of the impoverished social situation in China, the need to compete and survive in the global economy, and the national and international political forces that were operating at the time, educational policy making in the first stage of the New China (1949-1966) was full of conflicts and challenges. These challenges and conflicts were reflected in the choice of educational foundations, in the balance between mass education and elite education, and in the balance between liberal education for citizenry, technology, and engineering education for socialist construction. Economically, China was still globally connected with other nations, especially the developing nations. Although China focused on self-reliance policy in socialist construction, China needed technological assistance from foreign nations, especially from those developed powers. China was not totally excluded from the global economy and global competition at that time although the "globalization" was not used until the mid of the 1990s. Education

policy-making and reform were situated in a global context as soon as the new China was established.

### *Goals of Education and Reform*

*Mass education or elite education?* The notion that education should first serve the political and economic goals of the country gradually developed into a focus on educational policy-making. Since 1955, the debate over the goals of education in the central government led to the controversy over an important decision: Should China should have a mass education for all working classes, or should China concentrate on an elite education for a small number of intellectually-talented people? One side of the debate or controversy, represented by Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976), proposed to continue a mass education for all working-class people, as practiced in the former “red areas” that were controlled by the Communist Party from 1930 to 1949. However, the other side, represented by Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969) and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), thought that China’s socialist construction required a number of well-trained specialists and engineers. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping agreed that the mass education as an internal powerful weapon was in demand to reinforce and consolidate the Communist Party’s sovereign through promoting political and social harmony. They also realized that China was not isolated from the world and China’s security was also externally threatened by the hostile nations. China needed to develop its science, technology and economy for its own security. At this time (the 1950s), the new China, was too poor to provide an education for all people who wanted it. Eventually, the two sides reached a compromise and decided Chinese educational development needed to be balanced with two sides before affordable education was available to all people who desired it: toward

mass education *and* elite education. Despite the consensus in the philosophical approach to educational development, the reality of limited educational resources slowed progress in this realm. Policy-makers began to realize that the best and most efficient way to solve this problem was to select the best talent through competitive tests, and then to send them to the best schools to receive the best training.

### *Selection of Key Schools*

As a result of the desire to provide mass education and elite education through a reform of policy decisions and practices, a small number of existing schools were selected, re-organized, funded, and transformed into key schools (重点学校) (Yuan, 1999). The main purpose of key schools was to prepare students for college education. Students for key schools were selected from ordinary schools through competitive tests. Admission decision to key schools was made on the student test score instead of the social background. The curricula at the key schools were the same as those at the ordinary schools, but education at key schools was more test-oriented. Key school system was accepted as the fastest way to train talents for China's socialist construction.

Consequently, the new China, from the beginning (1949), had been confronted with a disparity between the small supply of talent that limited educational resources could provide, and the increasing demands for talent in the national socialist construction. Educational resources needed to be reserved for subject areas, schools, and students who were identified as the priorities of the nation state. At the same time, the government selected and financially supported a few schools that would be transformed into key

schools. Student selection was based primarily on entrance exam scores. This selective system was interrupted during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

### *Higher Education Reform*

Along with the key school system (key secondary schools and key universities), the focus of educational policy changed from reform of basic education to an emphasis on access to higher education. In secondary school education, instructional strategies and curriculum were geared toward the needs of a small number of top-performing students who were intended for promotion to colleges or universities. With regard to higher education, the government selected the subjects of applied science, technology, and engineering as the priorities for funding and development. Due to this change China's traditional focus on a liberal education was greatly reduced and overshadowed by a new education that was increasingly devoted applied science, technology and engineering. This policy priority was influenced by the global competition and cold-war tension at that time. The Chinese Communist Party was eager to develop science, technology and industry to narrow the gap between China and the developed powers, and to achieve China's national security. China exploded its first atomic bomb on Oct. 16, 1964 in the desert of Xinjiang, and launched its first satellite on 24 April, 1970. These achievements in science and technology fueled the Chinese people's patriotism, and meanwhile shocked China's counterparts (Yang, 2003).

The elite education system, particularly, the selective higher education system was interrupted by the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which focused on the political mass education to promote the public's class awareness. Not only did the focus of the education change, but additionally there were some changes with regard to

college admission policies and decisions because of the Cultural Revolution that was occurring at the same time in China. From 1966 to 1970, the college admission system was discontinued, and no new students were admitted to colleges. Simultaneously, college education was stopped, and almost all colleges and universities were occupied and used as battlefields by red guards for cultural revolution, many students were sent down to villages or factories to learn from peasants or workers, and many professors were put in reform schools in the countryside.

Mao believed that China's socialist construction needed more politically qualified people, rather than engineers, scientists or other professionals whose political awareness was not strong enough (Yang, 2003). So, instead of giving young people more professional education, Mao sent all of them to the villages or factories to learn the political consciousness from peasants or workers. In 1970, college/university admissions were re-opened, but the admissions were not based on the candidate's school performance and academic ability as measured by selective tests. Instead, each admission decision was made through a recommendation system, which was based on the candidate's social class, political background and social relations (Yuan, 1999).

The college admission system resumed and college education restarted from 1970, after four years of being discontinued. However, the admission policy was not based on candidate's test scores, but on recommendations by the supervisors, and the college's screening of the candidate's social background. There was no academic exam for college admission at that time. Many people in power took advantage of the recommendation system and sent their own children or children of relatives to colleges. Many recommended candidates were not academically ready for college education at all.

The recommendation system caused big corruption and chaos in education and society. The chaos and corruption in college admission disappointed many Chinese people, and they missed the days when they could go to schools and college admission decisions were made based upon their entrance exam scores. In summation, the educational policy-making and policy implementation strategy indicated that the traditional purpose of educational utilitarianism (for the usefulness of education, particularly for political and economic purposes) remained the same - education was being used as a means to serve the purposes of the regime (Niu, 1992). The traditional selective educational testing system to decide who would receive the elite education remained constant as well. Furthermore, the new policy-making strategy also reflected that the traditional value of education held by the Chinese people was not eliminated with the radical social changes (Suen & Vu, 2006; Yang, 2003). The traditional value on education was integrated into the educational system in the People's Republic of China, despite the Chinese Communist Party's attempt to reform the old China by rejecting all traditional values and ideas. An integration of philosophies from various traditions helped to create the new China's socialist education foundation and system, including traditional Confucianism and the experience in running education in "red areas" by the Chinese Communist Party (1927-1949) (Yuan, 1999).

#### Educational Utilitarianism (the 1970s)

##### *Reinstallation of College/University Entrance Examination*

Chinese education was historically characterized by a strong utilitarianism. This belief and educational direction was characterized by efforts to promote Confucianism, to manage the country, and to create continuity in the government. This won a degree of

support from the masses because government positions were determined through exams rather than by birth. The civil service exam system was the best representation of this utilitarianism. A long history of the practice of the civil service exam system reflected the Chinese people's understanding of educational value and the role of education. After the People's Republic of China was established, education was focused on the need to reinforce and consolidate the new regime. Industrialization and modernization of the new regime became the new priorities for the leaders in the new government; new China's educational reform was initiated primarily for this purpose.

From 1970, college admission reopened, but the admission decisions were made upon the candidates' political background and the recommendation from grass-root unit leaders. The admission system was seriously corrupted by nepotism and social relations (Niu, 1992). Though intellectuals were purged during Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people's value on education was not shaken. They believed that education would bring honor and reputation to both the individual and the family. So when college admission reopened, many people in power sent their children to colleges through back doors.

Unfortunately, the disastrous Cultural Revolution thus (1966-1976) discontinued the practice of quality education, particularly of college education in China, and pushed China into a state of chaos, which seriously affected China's continuing development. So, the first priority for Premier Deng Xiaoping, when he returned to power in 1977, was to reinstate the college/university entrance examination, which would be used to select and educate the best students for the national development and socialist construction.

Education was critical to China's economic and social development and prosperity, so the Chinese government placed greater emphasis on education after 1976;

this was the same year that the Great Cultural Revolution ended with Chairman Mao Zedong's death on September 9, and the arrest of the "Gang of Four" (four radical central leaders led by Mao's widow) in October. Education was re-oriented to achieve modernizations in science, technology, agriculture, industry, and defense. "To realize the four modernizations, science and technology are the keys...and education is the foundation" (quoted from Deng Xiaoping's speech at a work conference on education in 1977, Chinese Education Yearbook, 1984, p.45). Kwong (1983), a professor of sociology and Chinese study at the University of Manitoba, proposed that formal education in China was an efficient form of manpower investment to produce scientists for research and technicians for industrialization.

#### *Critics of the Reinstatement*

Critics considered that the reinstatement of the college entrance examination as the continuation of elite education in China (Niu, 1992; Yang, X., 1993; Yi, 2004; Yuan, 1999; Zhang, 1997). Historically and traditionally, Chinese education has been limited to only the small number of elite who qualified for the education through a series of selective exams (Bratton, 1979; Webber as cited in Gerth & Mills, 1946).

The reinstatement of the college entrance examination was heralded as the rejection of the Great Cultural Revolution, and characterized the shift of the government's work from a proletariat political movement to national economic development. It also provided an outlet for the suppressed enthusiasm of the Chinese people with regard to education (Yang, 2003). The radical social and political changes did not alter the Chinese people's traditional value of education; the large number of individuals who sought college admission reflected this value. There were 5.7 million



people registered for the college entrance examination in the winter of 1977, and 6.1 million people in the spring of 1978. Despite the large number of applicants, only 675,000 candidates were accepted (Chinese Education Year Book, 1982). Although only a small number of candidates were admitted to colleges, many applicants were appreciative of the opportunity to be able to participate in the competitive exam. Admission decisions that were made based upon one's entrance exam scores were viewed as more fair and just than previous admissions decisions (1972-1976) that were based solely on recommendations (Niu, 1992).

### *Impacts of Reinstatement*

As a highly centralized nation with a long history of selective testing, there exist some complex implications for reinstating the college/university entrance exam system in China. With regard to testing contents, the testing of a student's learning is exclusively based upon the instructional materials. This type of testing has been practiced and was believed to be the most effective and justified way of selecting the most intellectually qualified candidates for a higher level of education (Yang, 2003). When the educational resources were inadequate, the society was incapable of providing educational opportunity for everyone beyond the primary school level. From a sociological perspective, China has traditionally been a hierarchical society. The use of competitive exams for scarce places in universities has been viewed by many Chinese people as an egalitarian approach for all those who wanted to achieve social and economic mobility (Niu, 1992) regardless of the candidate's social background. Also, the reinstatement of the college/university entrance exam matched Chinese people's traditional value of education; the re-installation supported Kwong's (1983) argument for equal access to

education in China: Chinese people trust that, “before the system of grades, everyone is equal,” and that testing was a fair system of selection in that it prevented much of the corruption in education.

Before the Chinese educational system was transformed by the market economy system, corruption in education could be largely attributed to the acceptance of some unqualified students (according to test scores) to a higher level of schooling, through “Guanxi” – back door, personal relationship, or kinship (Hu, 1986). This problem was very common under the recommendation system practiced from 1972-1976 during the Great Cultural Revolution. China was not a well-institutionalized society, with well-established constitutions and laws, and therefore, the government was managed by the powerful leaders, rather than by rules, laws, and constitutions (Niu, 1992; Yang, 2003). Because Chinese education was highly selective, a good education was the key to an individual’s socio-economic mobility. With people knitted into a social network, corruption in the educational system could not be avoided.

Despite the inevitable problems with the system, the re-installment of the college/university entrance exam would be a fast and effective way to select and train a number of professionals for the national economic construction (Yang, 1995). This selective educational practice had profound consequences for Chinese education policy, the economy, and larger society. The establishment and restoration of the national college/university entrance examination influenced higher education, the operations of the education system, and even affected the entire society in many respects by fashioning the purpose of basic education, creating the accessibility for social mobility through education, and providing society with trained talent (Bratton, 1979, p. 1008).

Therefore, in the Chinese social context, the college/university entrance exam system as a selective and elite educational system produced both positive and negative consequences on the entire Chinese society. Through the selective examinations, the government selected many “qualified” students, and provided them with higher education and professional training (Kwong, 1983). In about two decades after the selective testing system was reinstalled and implemented in 1977, the testing policy proved to be an efficient approach for selecting and training those intellectually qualified candidates to meet the immediate demands for imperative socialist construction and modernizations (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998; Lin, 1993).

*Impacts on social and economic development.* From 1979 to 1995, through a three-tiered examination system in choosing students for junior high school, senior high school, and the university, China produced about 8.5 million college graduates, conferred 346 thousand master degrees and 26.7 thousand doctoral degrees in total (General Survey of Education in China, 1997). These educated students became the backbone of Chinese socialist economic development. They made a great contribution to Chinese economic prosperity and to the reinforcement of the socialist legitimacy by the Chinese Communist Party. Some gifted students from previously disadvantaged groups were rewarded with social and economic mobility for success in completing the exams (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998, Gu & Liu, 1994).

*Impacts on education and learning.* The college/university entrance examination also changed the attitudes of students and teachers because most Chinese people viewed schools as institutions for selecting talented people and providing them with social and economic mobility. "The system of unified college/university entrance examinations...

has spurred better teaching in the high schools... and has motivated a large number of young people to be 'study activists'" (Southern China Daily, May 11, 1980, p. 4). The entrance examination not only functioned as a critical tool for colleges and universities that made admission decisions on student test scores, but it was also used as a model that influenced every level of the educational system and the society as a whole. The role of the entrance examination has been described as a baton used by a concert conductor, and schools and teachers dance to this baton (Hu, 1986). The college examination used to be one of the few secure avenues to a well-paying job and a highly respected place in Chinese society (Pepper, 1984).

*Psychological impacts.* Unfortunately, the selective college/university entrance exam increased the rate of repeaters and dropouts in both rural and urban schools. According to Lin's (1993) research, the higher the grade-level that the student reached, the more likely he or she was to become a repeater. The state-unified curricula become increasingly difficult as rural students passed to higher grades. Those students who failed to lay sound foundations in their earlier years would eventually fall behind other students and would then be academically forced out of the system. Eventually, many secondary middle school students had to repeat the eighth or ninth grade if they expected to pass the entrance exam to high school. Psychologically, being assigned to a poor or slow class was a blow to a student's self-respect and confidence (Lin, 1993; Yuan, 1999). Many repeaters also suffered psychological damage (Lin, 1993). Many repeaters felt embarrassed and discouraged. Their younger classmates may have looked down upon them, may have teased them for their poor school performance, their parents probably scolded them, and their teachers often even ignored them. This negative practice of

shaming and criticizing the repeaters went against one of the Confucius' educational ideologies: to civilize and perfect human beings (Hu, 1985; Lin, 1993; Wu, 1986; Zhang, 1997).

At the high school level, there were still a high percentage of repeaters and dropouts. Since 1977 when the National College and University Entrance Examination was restored, all schooling was geared to these exams. Consequently, the goal of most schools was to promote students to higher education through exam success. Many strategies were applied to achieving this principal goal. Besides improving the quality of teaching (actually intensifying students test-taking skills), many schools also intentionally repeated students who were unlikely to succeed on the exam (Bratton, 1979; Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998; Lin, 1993). If these unprepared students were kept out of the exam pool, then the percentage of students entering colleges and universities would increase (Lin, 1993). To help weed-out students, schools gave students a series of exams, and based on their scores, students would be assigned to good classes (fast tracks), or poor classes (slow tracks). The few elite students who scored well on the exams were given favorable treatment, while the majority of students were not fairly treated. Instruction was tuned to the small number of top students who intended to enter colleges/universities, while the majority of students were ignored (Hu, 1986; Lin, 1993; Man, 1997).

*Negative social and economic impacts on society.* However, this selective education system also led to some negative consequences in education and in Chinese society. In general, the competition used to be ferocious for access to college. On average, only 1 out of 20 high school graduates could enter a university. A student who was not enrolled in a key elementary school would have a very slim opportunity of being

admitted into a key secondary middle school and then to a key high school and, as a consequence, there was a very small opportunity for this student to be admitted to a university (Kwong, 1983). Competitive college entrance examination intensified “exam prepping” to extremes. Teachers ignored the course syllabi, which was decreed from the education department, and drilled their students exclusively toward the examination-oriented materials. School administration added class hours to important subject areas, devoted the entire senior year to examination preparation, and overloaded students with extra assignments in the evenings to improve examination skills. Many students were subjected to tight schedules without relief, from 6:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., and in some cases parents told their children not to return home if they failed to gain admission to college (Fan, 1990; Hu, 1986; Lu, 1993; Mo, 2002; Niu, 1992; Yang, 2003).

The reinstallation of college/university also promoted more key-point schools. As previously mentioned, the policy-makers’ rationale for establishing and running key-point schools was to concentrate or invest limited human, financial, and other educational resources on a group of schools that would be employed to produce a number of qualified talents, primarily for economic construction and development. The policy might also serve other purposes: to improve the quality of secondary education; to explore an effective school management strategy; and to use key schools as examples for ordinary schools to model themselves after (Qian & Huang, 1985; Yuan 1999). However, the policy also perpetuated socio-economic and educational inequity in China: “a likely trend is for this two-track system to become, in effect, a major mechanism for stratification in China” (Lo, 1984, p. 62). The system broadened the gap between students, teachers, and schools as well (Yuan, 1999).

Consequently, the strategy of promoting some key-point schools lost its intended significance in providing some experience for ordinary schools in instruction and administration. Due to the imbalanced allocation of educational resources, the ordinary schools could not learn from the experience of the key-point schools, so the latter were isolated from exchanging educational experiences with the ordinary schools. Therefore, even if these schools had a high rate of college/university promotion, it has lost its significance with respect to education quality and equality (Rosen, 1984). On the contrary, the key schools promoted the ordinary schools to shift to promotion rate from all-round education. Test-oriented education was not quality education, and students' test scores were not exclusively equal to students' ability (Yuan, 1999; Zhang, 1997).

Other negative consequences in education and in Chinese society such as the perpetuation of social inequality and the widening of the gap between the urban and rural people, and between the poor and the rich, were also evidenced in this selective system (Lin, 1993; Niu, 1992). Chinese people believed that educational opportunity was the key to a successful career or an accomplished life (Wu & Luo, 1995). The cognitive and social skills gained through formal education were seen as the foundation upon which children of the poor were able to build their future well-being (Reimers, 2000). However, students from socio-economically disadvantaged families did not compete fairly with their peers who were from an economically advantaged family. In China, learning was closely correlated to well-designed exams - exams based upon learning and instructional materials. However, both instructional materials and instructional pedagogy were urban-centered, and rural students' needs were sadly ignored. These exams alone could not completely reflect these students' learning and other skills (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1987).

Therefore, students were competing unequally, due to the imbalanced distribution of educational resources and their different socio-economic backgrounds (Coleman, 1966; Niu, 1992).

*Social status impact.* The college/university entrance exam provided the motivation for many students to study hard, especially those from rural areas (Lin, 1993). Additionally, the government's residential policy used to prevent residents in smaller towns or cities from migrating to larger or more modernized urban cities where more educational and career opportunities were available, or where living and working conditions were supposed to be much better (Lin, 1993; Niu, 1992; Pepper, 1984). The rural peasants were subject to a very hard life in the fields, with little government support for medical care, pension, and other social benefits that urban residents were entitled to enjoy; as a result, rural people in China used to have a very low social status (Niu, 1992). For most rural students, going to college was the only way to work in a city and become an urban resident.

The selective college/university entrance exam best expressed the Chinese belief in educational values. Szekely and Hilgert (1999) stated that the past decade has been characterized by a globalization of the world economy, along with an increase in income and social inequality within and between nation-states. Social inequality and exclusion continued to grow as those with the least education among the poor in both urban and rural areas found it increasingly difficult to participate in social and economic processes in a knowledge-based global economy. Many Chinese people firmly held on to the idea that those who passed the exam were “dragons” and those who failed were “worms” (Niu, 1993; Suen & Yu, 2006; Teng, 1966). Diplomas and degrees were once seen as



passports to employment in China but they were also viewed as the most important credential for attaining a prestigious title, a good salary, promotion, and an opportunity to study abroad. Despite effort, desires, interests, goals, and attempts to improve, rural students who failed the college/university entrance exam were forced to lead a life of peasantry; these rural students had a very difficult time changing their existing lifestyle or class with any kind of social mobility (Lin, 1993; Niu, 1992; Zhou, 1986).

The college/university entrance exam actually increased discrepancies between school curriculum and rural needs. Rural schools, despite their vast difference in student needs and environmental situations, continued to teach the same curriculum as urban schools for the same purpose - to prepare them for the unified college/university entrance exam (Lin, 1993; Mo, 2002; Niu, 1992; Wu, 1986; Yang, 2003). However, the test items were more selective-oriented, and were not necessarily designed as a measure for checking student learning and teacher instructing. This orientation led to a tendency for the curriculum in schools at all levels to become more and more difficult for rural students to grasp (Lin, 1993; Niu, 1992; Yuan, 1999). The exam-oriented curriculum has been criticized for failing to meet the needs of the students from rural areas. Some rural high school graduates were unable to write a letter, a receipt, or a simple contract for a small businesses deal. They spent most of their time preparing for and taking a series of exams, and they were unable to learn even the simple skills and basic knowledge needed for rural business (Lin, 1993; Wu, 1986). Although rural students may have learned chemistry and physics in both secondary and high school, they may not have known how to utilize fertilizer, knew nothing about waterpower (Zhang, 1986), and lacked the

scientific knowledge and skills necessary to be a successful farmer. Skills were not applicable in the real world for these students.

*Knowledge and application discrepancies.* Negative consequences continued to be evident, because after many years of school training with the hopes of gaining a respectable status and intellectual work as an urban resident, many rural students did not want to meet the needs of their rural areas, and instead, looked down on farm work (Lin, 1993; Zhang, 1986). Wu (1986) mentioned that one peasant bitterly complained that he suffered for not having an education, but his child suffered for not knowing *where* to use his knowledge. There existed discrepancies between the increasing needs of rural businesses, and what schools were teaching (Wu, 1986; Zhang, 1986). The rural areas were and continue to be in need of people who are quick in utilizing information, flexible enough to accept new ideas and learn new information, and able to manage business; meeting the needs of the rural area could simultaneously allow the individual to improve personal quality of life and reduce personal or family poverty (Lin, 1993; Qian & Huang, 1987). However, rural schools continue to manufacture millions of exam experts who do not know how to apply test-knowledge in actual life settings; they may have lacked the competence to work or solve problems independently. Excessive emphasis on the entrance exam fostered negative values that tended to keep these rural students from committing themselves to making environmental and social progress in the rural areas where they lived (Lin, 1993; Wu, 1986; Zhang, 1986). Urban schooling and its curriculum focus suggested to rural students that only a life outside the rural areas was worth living. So, when the majority of rural students failed the entrance exam and had to

go back to the small villages, they likely felt lost and less motivated to accept rural work and living (Niu, 1992).

*Impacts on the tracking system.* Although many rural students were the victims of the educational assessment with an extreme emphasis on the national college/university entrance exam, the urban students might experience inequality from the tracking system, as a result of entrance exam (Lin, 1993; Niu, 1992). Compared with rural schools, urban schools had a more systematic tracking system that segregated students into two groups; with regard to opportunity and access, these two groups were treated very differently. Based on individual test scores, each student was separated further and was placed in either a fast or slow track; so they were already categorized before they were even admitted to the school (Lin, 1993; Niu, 1992). Students who obtained extraordinarily high scores on the entrance exam were usually selected to enter key-point middle schools, where they enjoyed a better learning environment with more educational resources. As a result, they were often more prepared to take the college/university entrance exam, and had more opportunities to enter the more prestigious colleges (Yuan, 1999). Whether students went to ordinary schools or key-point schools depended on their entrance exam score, which was not only influenced by students' personal efforts, but by other factors as well. These factors included students' socio-economic background, the quality of faculty, instructional content, and other available educational resources. Students did not compete equally on these exams; however they were consistently judged to be academically successful in terms of these same test scores.

*Change in Educational Philosophy in the 1970s*

As mentioned previously, success in testing was the main channel that Chinese students used to get a higher level of schooling, and eventually a respectable job. Therefore, failure on the exam, whether the test-taker was rural or urban, was devastating and limiting; rural students who failed often had to return to the desperation of rural life, while the urban failures had tremendous difficulty finding a job. The once promising and bright future was out of reach for students who failed the high-stakes tests (Lin, 1993). This threat and the strong desire to succeed gave students great motivation and provided a high expectation for learning. But, the exam system was negative, in that it created extraordinarily high expectations and pressures for students, teachers, and parents. This exam-oriented educational system also placed a tremendous emphasis on rote learning, and made people believe that the purpose of learning (and teaching) was to prepare for exams. This exam-oriented educational system perpetuated the socio-economic inequality in Chinese society. This situation applied to students of all nationalities in China, though nationality students in China were admitted to colleges/universities at a comparatively lower standard than Han (汉) students. Students from rural areas and socio-economic disadvantaged families could not compete with their peers equally.

According to Yuan Zhenguo (1999), a senior professor of education at China Eastern Normal University in Shanghai, the selective test-oriented system did not effectively improve students' learning and thinking processes. For many years of education, students had been trained to improve their test-taking skills through rote learning. However, they may not have been competent enough to solve problems in

everyday life and work. As a result, they struggled to compete in the world economy and encountered many challenges and difficulties.

*Test-oriented education and students' morality and citizenship.* Furthermore, morality and citizenship were not a major focus of education in schools, though the government kept stating that schools and teachers should pay a close attention to morality and citizenship education; university teachers also complained that most selected high school graduates were not academically, psychologically, or morally ready for college life and college education. Test skills could be reflected in their academic test scores, but other qualities such as morality, citizenship, responsibility, and adaptability could not be easily measured. A student's test score was the main criterion used to evaluate student overall development. Consequently, schools, teachers, parents, and students gave their attention to improving test-taking skills, rather than to the development of other qualities. Many Chinese people complained that the selective and exam-oriented education actually made most Chinese students selfish, immoral, and irresponsible. The social effects of this academic problem were evident in the rising rate of college students who were committing suicide, murder, robbery, and other serious crimes (China Youth Daily, May 6, 2004). The ongoing selective test-oriented educational system required reform.

In 1977, the restored educational system was similar to the pre-cultural revolution education system in terms of education selectiveness. In both systems, student promotion to a higher level of schooling depended on his or her test scores on the entrance examinations. The key-point school system also continued. Though the educational system was becoming increasingly decentralized in terms of funding and curriculum, the testing was still curriculum-and-instructional-content-based.

## Educational Reform in the 1980s

### *An Orientation Toward Testing*

As previously discussed, there are many implications and consequences associated with the reinstating of the college/university entrance exam in 1977. The reinstatement produced profound impacts on individuals and society, on education itself and economic development, and on China's opening and reform policies as well. In addition to its contributions to the re-construction of China's socialist economy and modernizations (by selecting and training a large number of professionals), the reinstating of the college/university entrance exam also produced some unwanted consequences on education and society. The college/university entrance exam refreshed the Chinese people's misdirected enthusiasm about testing. Students, teachers, schools, parents, and the whole society were magically driven to a focus on entrance exams and student test scores. Student learning, teacher instructing, and educational evaluations were all geared toward scores on the entrance exams. The whole basic education system in China became test-oriented; in order to pursue a better promotion rate to a higher level of schooling, schools increased the school burden on students by extending school time, adding extra school assignments, assorting and placing students into different tracks, or primarily focusing instruction on only the top students (Niu, 1992; Yang, 2003). So, in the early 1980s, lightening the school burden, and correcting the unfair tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate to a higher level of schooling became the two primary goals of educational reform in China.

### *Chronic Problems Resurface*

The one-sided pursuit of promotion rate to a higher level of schooling and the overloaded school burden of students were the two chronic problems in China's selective exam-oriented education system, and continued to be problems within the larger socio-cultural context.

*School burden.* From an historical perspective, all learning and instruction was geared toward motivating students to succeed on the Civil Service Exam; all students were overloaded with rote learning and memorization of the *four books and five classics* for the exams until the Civil Service Exam was abolished in 1905. The Civil Exam was discontinued, but the traditional concepts of testing and learning evolved into the new educational system. The overloading of schoolwork was stressful for many scholars, both physically and psychologically (Teng, 1966; Suen & Vu, 2006). In the 1950s, Chairman Mao Zedong warned that schools should place student health as a top priority, while school performance should be of secondary importance (Yi & Li, 2004). In the early 1960s, Mao Zedong restated that students were overloaded with too many courses and were given too much schoolwork. Mao Zedong suggested that the educational system, curricula, courses, instructional pedagogy, educational assessment method, and testing policy needed to be reformed (China Education Yearbook, 1984). In 1978 (at a national education conference), Deng Xiaoping argued that the students' overloaded school burden was a serious issue and that some effective measures were needed to resolve the chronic problem (Yuan, 1999). For almost twenty years since the national education conference in 1978, the problem of overloaded school burden has continuously occupied Chinese policy and educational criticism. In 1999, the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council jointly issued "*A Decision on Deepening the Education Reform, and Fully*

*Promoting Quality Education.*” In this document, the policy-makers repeated that lessening the school burden was an essential step in promoting quality education in China, and should be considered the first priority of the educational reform. Jiang Zeming, the former Chinese President, said in his *Speech on Chinese Education* in 2000, that some students were overloaded with so much schoolwork that they were under great pressures psychologically, which seriously affected their health (Party Literature Research Centre of the Chinese Communist Party, 2006). In response to Jiang’s speech, the Ministry of Education issued a *Circular on Taking Prompt Measures to Lighten Students’ School Burden* (2000). The officials urged schools, teachers, and parents to take prompt measures to lessen student school burden.

From Chairman Mao Zedong to President Jiang Zemin, the problem of student school burden was never successfully resolved. Instead, this problem became worse and worse, in that competition for college education was still very strong; gaining admission to a prestigious school was especially and extremely competitive. The school burden was closely related to the strong competition for access to a college education, when college admission decisions were based upon student test scores. The testing orientation of the Chinese educational system was more obvious than ever in the 1980s.

*College entrance exam – A band-aid reform.* The reinstating of the college/university entrance exam only addressed the question about whether or not China actually needed education at all, after the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. Immediately after the Cultural Revolution, the policy-makers were not certain about what kind of education China needed for the socialist construction and modernizations (Yang, 2003). The policy-makers had no time to think about what type of education China



needed for the long term or for the future. Because they needed to make a quick decision to improve conditions, they corrected the radical thoughts on politics and education, and restored the college/university entrance exam (Yang, 1995). However, education was far more complicated than the policy-makers would have expected. As China's reform and opening policies in both the political and economic system were implemented in the 1980s, the chronic problems, and some new challenges in education arose. Especially, as the world was increasingly globalized, Chinese policy-makers saw a strong imperative in reforming the testing-oriented education to meet challenges from the global economy.

*Promotion rate.* In addition to the problems of the overloaded school burden and the exam orientation, there was also the problem of the one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher level of schooling, and a promotion rate for entering key schools (重点学校). Chinese education in the 1980s was called “an education of one-sided pursuit for promotion rate” (片面追求升学率的教育) (Yang, D., 2003). Deng Xiaoping was the central leader of the Chinese Communist Party and, the primary advocate and supporter of the reform and opening policy in economic and political system (i.e. introducing capitalist market economy into China's economic and democracy into political system). Eventually, Deng became aware of the negative consequences from the ongoing testing policy in education; he began to think of reforming the whole educational system in China. In response to the critiques on the promotion-rate-oriented education (片面追求升学率的教育), Deng Xiaoping visited Beijing Jinshan Middle School, a key middle

school for the children of high-rank officials in Beijing, on the National Day in 1983. In his speech to the teachers and staff, and in his autography for Jinshan Middle School, Deng Xiaoping stated that education in China should be “oriented to modernizations, oriented to the world, and oriented to the future” ( 教育要面向现代化，面向世界，面向未来) (People’s Daily, October 2, 1983, A1).

### *Ignored Efforts Toward Quality Education*

Deng Xiaoping’s “three orientations” were very thought-provoking, and became the cornerstone for China’s education reform in the 1980’s. The Ministry of Education clearly stated that, in conformity with the “three orientations” (三个面向) of education, it was time to reduce students’ overloaded school (and homework) burden, so as to correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher level of schooling (Yang, 1999; Yuan, 1999). From 1983 to 2002, the Ministry of Education issued over sixteen circulars, proposals, or orders to lift the students’ overloaded school burden, to redirect instructing and learning away from testing, and to reform the overall testing system of the three principal entrance examinations (The Entrance Examination for Admissions to Secondary Middle School, The Entrance Examination for Admissions to General High School, and The Entrance Examination for Admissions for Colleges/Universities 初中入学考试, 中等教育入学考试, 高等教育入学考试 ); this was meant to free students from the over-loaded school burden for testing, correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher level of schooling, and reform the whole educational system

in favor of a quality education. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, schools did not pay attention to these proposals. These proposals did not give detailed information on why or how these proposals should be implemented. Most importantly, schools, teachers and students continued to be evaluated exclusively by student test scores and promotion rate.

In response to Deng Xiaoping's speech at Beijing Jingshan Middle School, the Ministry of Education issued a circular, "*Ten Regulations on Fully Carrying Out the Mission of National Education, and Correct the Tendency of Blindly Seeking Promotion Rate in General Middle Schools*" on December 31, 1983. In this circular, the Ministry of Education put forward ten proposals to reduce students' school burden, and to correct the tendency for schools to focus instructing and learning on the pursuit of promotion rate for a higher-level of schooling.

The ten efforts toward the national education mission were directed at improving educational services at all levels, from the national level to the individual student level. Ultimately, schools and local education bureaus were required to implement these proposals strictly, and any resistance to these suggestions would be penalized.

Primarily, education was to be aimed at serving the socialist modernization and construction by preparing quality students for colleges and universities, and by providing skillful human resources for the nation. Additionally, some of the identified regulations were designed to alter the assessment process in schools. The circular called for a more appropriate assessment and direction for evaluating the overall work of school administration and teachers. Student test scores and promotion rate for college should not be the exclusive approach to evaluating school and teachers. Along the same lines, course

design and instruction were to be compliant with state or provincial regulations. Course design, classroom instructing and learning were not to be oriented to entrance exams.

Several of the ten regulations were focused on the individual student, and were designed to foster well-rounded development and reduce the burden of school with several strategies. Efforts would be made to reinforce and promote the political and moral education of students. One of the most important strategies toward educational improvement was to reduce students' school burden, which meant that students would not be subjected to extra school days, extra classes, and extra homework in order to promote student test skills, without local education bureau's permit. The regulations also helped to ensure that students would have adequate sleeping time of about nine hours.

Several of the other regulations were designed to reduce the number of tests significantly. Only midterm and final tests were suggested, and test contents were to be gathered from learning materials prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Additionally, stable instructing and learning order must be maintained, so that no full-day test training classes were allowed in any school. Similarly, teachers and schools should focus on quality teaching research, not exclusively on improving test scores and promotion rate (Ministry of Education, 1983).

The dual missions for secondary education in China were preparing students for college education and providing skillful human resources for the socialist construction. The Ministry of Education warned schools not to shift the focus away from the majority of students and on to only the few students who were intentionally prepared to enter college; schools should not limit the focus to the one-sided goal of improving students' test scores and promotion rate; and schools should not rank students and teachers

according to test scores. Additionally, the local government or educational bureau should not rank schools according to test scores and promotion rate; and schools should not overload students with more tests, more assignments, more classes, and longer school time. The circular regarding the ten regulations also clearly stated that the ratio of students admitted to a higher-level of education should not be the only way to evaluate the performance of students, schools, and teachers. The description of these ten regulations was part of the first official document issued by the government to help deal with the two chronic problems in China's education system: students' overloaded school burden and the one-sided pursuit of promotion rate. Ironically, and despite the lack of improvement that repetition might typically foster, the rhetoric in this document was repeated to help illustrate the repetitive and unchanging problems in the Chinese educational system.

### *Goals and Barriers Toward Quality Education*

The Chinese government realized that these chronic problems could have been a result of the fact that China was a developing country with a large population. There were several issues identified with regard to the problems. First, educational resources were limited and education was not (and is not in 2007) accessible to all who desired it. Second, China's education system was planned and funded by the central government. Third, China's education failed to serve its economic development and socialist construction purposes; in that China's educational system reform did not catch up with its economic system reform. The first priorities for the central government were to reform the educational system by giving more power to the local government and schools and by shifting school funding responsibility to the local government. The main purpose of this

reform was to restructure China's educational system so that it was best able to serve China's economic development and its socialist reconstruction in a global world. At the same time, this reform made it possible for China to popularize *the compulsory nine-year basic education* (九年制义务教育) strategy; this education eventually became accessible to all Chinese children. However, the implementation of *the compulsory nine-year basic education* in China would take a long period of time, particularly in the rural areas, where there exists a great variance in terms of economic development.

Five or six years of elementary school education, and three or four years of secondary middle school education equates to the nine-year compulsory and basic education in China. The State Education Commission categorized the elementary school education, secondary middle school education, and high school education into basic education; therefore, in many cases, a circular on school reform addressed all three levels of school education. But, the three-year secondary high school education was not included in the compulsory education, which means that not all graduates from secondary middle school were eligible for high school. Instead, admission to high schools was based on students' entrance exam scores.

The nine-year basic education was meant to be accessible to all Chinese children. It was also intended to solve the two chronic problems in basic education. The Ministry of Education (in conformity with Deng) clearly stated in the "*Proposals on the Teaching Principle in Six-Year Elementary Schools*" (1984) that, the "three orientations" of education (to be oriented to modernizations, to be oriented to the world, and to be oriented to the future 教育要面向现代化，面向世界，面向未来) (People's Daily,

October 2, 1983) were critical features of the educational reform. As a result of this publication, the need to reduce students' overloaded academic burden in terms of homework and to correct the tendency of over-stressing the entrance/admission examination for a higher level of learning became top priorities for China. The government proposed that the entrance examination should be gradually discontinued for elementary school graduates who were entering secondary middle schools, and that it should be gradually discontinued in some comparatively developed areas where secondary middle school education was already accessible to all those who needed it.

#### *The "Decision" to Reform*

On May 27, 1985, the Ministry of Education announced "*The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Decision on Educational System Reform*". The decision to reform China's educational system was a response to Deng's three orientations of education (oriented to the world, oriented to the future, and oriented to the four modernizations) (Yang, 1995 & 2003). This important reform policy was meant to accomplish several goals on several different levels.

First, in order to meet the demands and challenges of the Chinese economy system reform, CCP decided to reform China's education system to promote an overall quality of the Chinese people, so that the system could provide many competitively skillful talents for China's socialist construction. By the same token, Chinese education had to serve China's socialist construction which heavily relied on education development. Because of these global and economic goals, the educational system needed to be restructured for a balance between basic education and higher education or vocational education. Secondly, more flexibility from the central government and local

government was required for education reform and development. Funding responsibility for schools should be switched to the local government. China hoped to promote the national nine-year compulsory basic education, and to switch the responsibility from the central government to the local government.

Additionally, a number of changes needed to be made within schools, classrooms and for the individual students. Educational concepts, instructional contents and materials, instructional pedagogy needed to be updated. The educational assessment system also required modification. Changes at these local levels were also meant to reduce students' school burden and correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher-level schooling – both of which continued to be problematic for China. As a result of all these desired changes, it was equally as critical to increase the funding that was required for education development. (The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, May 27, 1985)

In the document, which may be considered the cornerstone of educational reform in China in the 1980s, the CCP declared its decision and determination to reform the Chinese educational system and structure so as to meet the national demands of economic development and socialist construction. The announcement restated the notion that education was the key to China's socialist reconstruction and materialization of the four modernizations. The purpose of the educational reform was to make basic education accessible to more people, and to simultaneously promote human resources for socialist reconstruction and modernization.

In the “*Decision*,” the central government believed that educational system reform was the key to solving all other problems in education, such as inadequate school



funding, bureaucracy, mismatch between education and the socialist construction, students' overloaded school burden, as well as the and one-sided pursuit of test scores and promotion for a higher level schooling. Through restructuring the school system, the local government would be responsible for school funding, and the provincial government would be responsible for curriculum design, textbooks, and other instructing issues; however, the central government still tightly controlled the direction of educational development.

The “*Decision*” significantly impacted China’s education reform. On April 12, 1986, the People’s Congress passed the first educational law in China - the “*Act of Compulsory Education in the People’s Republic of China*” ( *中华人民共和国义务教育法* ) - and it was enacted on the July 1<sup>st</sup> in the same year (1986). The key points of this act were similar to the previous attempts at educational reform. The key points of the act were designed to accomplish the following: to promote basic education in China so as to enhance socialist material and spiritual civilizations, to implement the nine-year compulsory education in China, to hold the local government accountable for its implementation and funding. Also, this basic education needed to be compliant with state education principles. Additionally, the act was meant to ensure that the free compulsory education was accessible to all children in China regardless of gender, nationality, ability, and other differences. Special education was initiated for children with special needs. And finally, changes and the direction of curriculum, course design, instructional content, and textbooks became controlled by the central government. (The China People’s Congress, April 12, 1986)

With this law, the central government successfully shifted the school funding responsibility to the local government, and the local government invested more funding in schools. With such a huge population and continued economic underdevelopment, the Central Chinese government could not afford a free education for all children. There also existed great variations in culture, economy, nationality and other respects, so it was more practical and feasible to allow some flexibility to the local government in implementing compulsory education. The law stated that the local government should make secondary middle school education accessible to all children. It also in one way or another helped to lighten overloaded school burden of elementary students because the elementary graduates (in most areas) were able to enter secondary middle school without taking the entrance exam. Both the CCP's "Decision" on education reform and the Act of Compulsory Education reflected Deng Xiaoping's "neoliberalism" in manipulating China's economic and political reform. His neoliberal belief focused on denaturalization of China's highly centralized social, political and economic system; this would result in a reconstitution of state powers such as privatization, finance, and market processes. State interventions in the economy and education were minimized, while the obligations of the state to provide for the welfare of its citizens were diminished by switching the responsibility to local government (Harvey, 2005). This did, on the one hand, generate more opportunities in basic education for the Chinese children. More schools were funded and established by the local government to provide compulsory education for children.

The "neoliberalism" also influenced China's higher education. The state gradually shifted the funding responsibilities to parents and local government. This belief

encouraged the Chinese government to enlarge the enrollment for higher education since the late 1990s, and more high school graduates could go to colleges if they could afford tuition. On the other hand, it decreased the educational opportunities for some economically disadvantaged groups. Without state funding, many schools in underdeveloped areas realized in that the local government was not able to pay teacher salaries, and other education fees. Even if the central government enlarged the enrollment for higher education, it was no longer free, like it used to be, so students needed to pay tuition and boarding. Many students could not afford to go to college despite the fact that they may have been academically qualified.

The central government's strategy to decentralize the funding system and enlarge higher education enrollment was the part of China's reform from state-planned economy to market economy. Due to the unbalanced economic development in different areas, education became inaccessible to some children from underdeveloped areas or disadvantaged families without support from state government. The marketization of Chinese education also perpetuated inequality and created corruptions in education. Some school principals or heads of education bureaus levied different education fees that would financially break the poverty-stricken families. The money went to the principal of school officials instead of for students. Some rich parents might also be able to buy admission opportunities for their child to school through bribing school officials or teachers.

Furthermore, the "Decision" also initiated the entrance exam reform for both high schools and colleges/universities, as well as the reforms of curriculum, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy. But most significantly, it reinforced the educational concept that education had to be reformed in order to serve the national

socialist construction and to promote or encourage the realization of the four modernizations in China. All educational reform had to be initiated and conducted around this center.

*Post - “Decision” Reform Documents*

The “*Decision*” also promoted the State Education Commission (the former Ministry of Education) to issue a document called/entitled “*A Circular on Reforming the Entrance Examination to Secondary Middle School Where Secondary Middle School Education Is Popularized*” on March 3, 1986. In the circular, the State Education Commission stated that, beginning with the summer of 1986, the State Education Commission planned to reform the entrance examination system for the elementary school graduates preparing for secondary middle school, and they would gradually abolish this entrance examination altogether. At the same time, the government also stated that the local education bureaus and schools had to reduce the number of external examinations, so as to shift the testing-orientation of education to more of a focus on a quality education; at the same time, this would also serve the purpose of reducing students’ overloaded academic burden and the intense stress associated with testing.

Chinese educational reform in the early 1980s focused on the elementary and secondary middle school education reform, which reached its summit in 1985 and 1986 when the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party announced the “*Decision of the CCP Central Committee on the Reform of the Educational System*”, and when “*The Act of Compulsory Education in the People’s Republic of China*” was enacted to meet the demands of the national economy reform and modernizations. The central government initiated a strategy to popularize the nine-year compulsory basic education.

This educational reform emphasized the decentralization of the highly centralized educational system in order to improve both educational efficiency and educational effectiveness, which would consequently enhance educational quality. More importantly, it was the first time that the Chinese government legally supported the right to the nine-year basic education for the Chinese people; the right to this basic education was validated when this policy became a law.

*“The Act of Compulsory Education in the People’s Republic of China”* (1986) was issued and enacted to promote the nine-year compulsory basic education for *all* Chinese children; this indicated that the CCP intended to reform the selective educational system in order to promote the basic education in China. It also stated that the implementation of the universal nine-year basic education system depended on other relevant reforms, including: a restructuring the educational system, a shifting of the funding responsibilities to the local governments (townships, counties, and cities), and the reforming of the educational assessment system. More importantly, the law called on people to change their educational concepts and values. Schooling was no longer intended to be one-sided, or largely targeted at test scores and school promotion.

After the “Decision” (1985) and the “Act” (1986) were implemented, there was a significant reform to China’s educational testing policy with regard to the entrance examination for secondary middle school. The primary school students were not necessarily required to take the selective entrance examination to enter secondary middle school after five or six years of elementary school, especially since China was attempting to popularize the nine-year basic education. The entrance exam at this point was optional, or at least it was not selective.

Unfortunately, the implementation of the nine-year basic education did not seem to be helpful in correcting the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion for a higher-level of schooling in secondary middle school and high school. Students' overloaded school burden was not reduced either, and students were not released from schoolwork and academic pressure. So on November 5, 1988, the State Education Commission issued a second attempt at reform, called "*Regulations on Lightening Elementary School Students' Overloaded Academic Burden at School.*" The "*Regulations*" stated that in order to reduce the overloaded academic burden, all schools needed to be strict in carrying out the teaching principles identified by the State, and schools were required to reduce the number of both internal and external examinations. The "*Regulations*" further stated that local educational bureau and the local government should not rank or evaluate schools, classes, and teachers according to entrance examination scores or by the promotion ratio to a higher-level of schooling. The circular strongly argued that it was wrong for a local educational bureau, government, or school administration to reward any elementary schools, classes, or teachers based on a promotion ratio to a key-point middle school.

For a better understanding of this paradoxical situation in Chinese education, it is necessary to know the utilitarian aspect of education in the Chinese tradition. The traditional purpose of schooling has not been focused on the process of learning, but rather on the outcomes associated with succeeding on various exams (Hu, 1986; Suen & Vu, 2006). Neither the entrance exam for secondary middle school, nor the entrance exam for high schools was nearly as critical as the college/university entrance exam; a student's future depended on testing success at the university level. The earlier entrance

exams were just two smaller steps toward the more decisive one, because only the success in the college/university entrance exam would bring a promising future, reputation, and respect for both the student and the family (Pepper, 1984). Despite the reform attempts, the fixes were only temporary and only began the discontinuing of the entrance exam to secondary middle school and initiating unbiased access to the nine-year basic education. The reforms were not enough, however, to correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate and to reduce students' school burden; more reforms were needed and were inevitable in the other two entrance exams, especially in the college/university entrance exam.

#### *Testing Policy Changes in the College/University Entrance Exam*

So after 1988, the Chinese government tried to reform the other two entrance examinations: the entrance examination for both high school and for colleges/universities. Of these two exams, the Chinese government centered their attention on the latter. The college/university entrance examination was and is the most important educational test in China. The reform of the college/university entrance examination was critical to the reform of the whole educational assessment system, and to larger educational system reform in China (Liao, 1993; Ma, 1993; Yang, 1993, 1993b).

Beginning in 1988, Chinese educational assessment reform was largely geared toward change with regard to middle school education. Graduation examination and college/university entrance examination in general middle school received special attention. On May 11, 1988, the State Education Commission issued a circular of *“Suggestions on Re-Orientating Teaching and Learning in General Middle Schools to Quality Education, Correcting the Tendency of Blindly Seeking for Promotion Ratio, and*

*Reinforcing Educational Supervision.*” The circular put forth suggestions on building up positive attitudes toward education in general middle schools, so as to correct the tendency of teaching, and leaning one-sidedly for promotion to a higher level of schooling.

On July 26, 1989, The State Education Commission issued another circular of *“Proposals on Reforming College Entrance Examination and Admission Policies.”* In this circular, the State Education Commission announced initiatives to reform the college/university entrance examination, and the plan to implement a graduation examination system and college/university entrance examination for general high school students. The State Education Commission clarified that the key to reforming the college entrance examination and graduation examination for high school students was to reform testing subject areas, testing content, and the testing format, in order to promote a well-rounded quality education (素质教育). The Commission further stated that the success of this educational assessment reform in general high school would eventually need to be based on a revision of educational concepts and educational values, and the reform of curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy.

According to the Chinese educators, critics, and policy-makers, the college/university entrance examination was the only authorized educational assessment in general high school that could be used to evaluate school administration, teaching, and learning; the test score was the exclusive criterion for college/university admission. This testing policy contributed significantly to the one-sided pursuit of test scores, to the pursuit of the promotion ratio to higher learning institutions, and to the overloaded school



burden (Gu, 1994; Guo, 1993; Hao, 1993; Hu, 1986; Liao, 1993). The key to reforming education rested in educational assessment policy reform, and this key was in the hand of government, not in the hands of schools and teachers (Wu & Luo, 1995; Yang, 1993, 1993b). When the State Education Commission, on July 26, 1989, issued a circular “*An Opinion on the Experimental Implementation of Graduation Examination System in General High Schools,*” many educators expressed a great enthusiasm about supporting the government’s decision. The State Education Commission agreed (with the government) that it was necessary to implement a graduation examination system in secondary high schools, so as to distinguish this level of testing from the college entrance examination; the ultimate goal with this proposal would be to solve the chronic problems faced by Chinese education system, namely, school burden, the one-sided pursuit of promotion ratio and test-oriented education (Yang, 1993, 1993b). Simultaneously, the State Education Commission clearly stated that the graduation examination was a criterion-referenced proficiency test, which was designed to assess whether or not instruction and learning were meeting the educational standards set up by the state or the province. Although it was not considered a selective exam, like the college/university entrance examination, it was equally important in evaluating school administration, teaching, and learning (Zhen, 1993, 1993b).

Following the initiative to implement a graduation examination from general high school, the State Education Commission also issued “*An Opinion on the Reform of the General College and University Admission Policies and Their Method of Enrolling New Students*” in 1989; this was meant to reform the assessment policy in basic education. Critics thought that the implementation of this policy would be helpful in changing the

focus of high school instruction and learning; the goal of reforming testing subjects, testing contents, and testing format was to move away from college/university-oriented education to a well-rounded, newly-developed quality education. More importantly, the government clearly defined the dual goals of the general high school education: besides preparing students for college, high school was also intended to prepare students to become well-rounded human resources for China's socialist construction and modernizations, and produce competitive talent for increasingly global economy (Zhang, 1997; Yang, 1993a, 1993b).

#### *The End of 1980s Reform*

In summary, the Chinese basic educational reform in the 1980s began with an effort to reduce the school burden and to correct the one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher level of schooling. However, it was Deng Xiaoping's "three orientations" (to be oriented to modernizations, to be oriented to the world, and to be oriented to the future) that directed China's educational reform in the 1980s (People's Daily, October 2, 1983). Deng Xiaoping's ideas about reform to basic education summated the Chinese Communist Party's "Decision" to reform the educational system, and further supported the passage of "*The Act of Compulsory Education in the People's Republic of China*" (1986) by the People's Congress of China. Despite the attempts, this reform did not solve the two chronic problems in Chinese education: school burden and one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher level of schooling. As a result, in the late 1980s, the Chinese government was forced to address alternative reform options, including the reform of the college/university entrance examination.

### Reform in the 1990s: Test-Oriented or Quality-Oriented Education?

The testing policy reforms in the 1980s did not successfully resolve the two chronic problems in Chinese education, though the educational system reform did make the nine-year basic education accessible to most school children. So in the late 1980s, the Chinese government attempted to reform testing policies in both secondary middle schools and general high schools. The reform was initiated in the late 1980s, and it continued into the 1990s. As the educational reform deepened, Chinese education shifted away from testing and toward a quality education.

#### *Political Context for Education Reform in the 1990s*

Educational assessment reform and larger educational system reform in the 1980s was spurred and directed by Deng Xiaoping's "three orientations," so it was no surprise that educational assessment reforms in the 1990s were also influenced by Deng Xiaoping; especially effective were his speeches during his tour to the southern cities such as Wuchang, Zhuhai, Shenzhen, and Shanghai in 1992 (Chen, 2004; Gu, 1994; Hao, Tan & Wang 1998; Yang, 1995; Yuan, 1999).

However, it was argued that prior to Deng Xiaoping's *Speeches in Southern Cities*, the State Education Commission had already attempted to reform the educational assessment system. This argument was evidenced in 1990, during the Work Conference of the State Education Commission, where the Commission stated that the reform of the examination system was one of the four priorities in reforming the basic educational system in China. At this conference, Li Tieying, the head of the State Education Commission remarked:

We must reform the examination system of high schools. The college and university entrance examination system itself will also be reformed at the appropriate time on the basis of the cardinal principle of benefiting the overall effective implementation of educational guidelines, and meeting the goals of secondary education (China Education and Research Network, *Key Events in China's Education Development in 1990*, p. 4).

The argument was further evidenced by another educational conference. In March of 1990, the State Education Commission held a "National Work Conference to Discuss Reforming the System of Promoting Graduates from High Schools to Colleges and Universities and the Examination System"; the aim of this conference was to implement a graduation examination system in general high schools. In addition to examination system reform, the State Education Commission also intended to adjust the teaching guidelines for high schools and reformed the curriculum and teaching contents. The State Education Commission planned to realize college/university entrance examinations on the basis of new subject matter, as well as the reform of the existing content of the examination. But Deng Xiaoping's

influence on China's education reform could not be downplayed. Deng was the key strategist in China's reform since 1978 (Chen, 2004; Yang, 1995). Deng's three-orientation theory in education reform best reflected that China's education reform for quality education was challenged and geared to global competition in world economy.

Despite the reform attempt, the State Education Commission and the policy-makers did not seem to be aware of the correlations between the educational assessment reform and a quality education, between educational reform and economic reform, and between educational development and economic development. Prior to Deng Xiaoping's speeches, the educational policy-makers seemed to focus on testing policy change in secondary middle schools and general high schools, and did not concentrate on the connection to China's market economy reform (Yang, 1995), especially was not aware of the connection between quality education and globalization.

Perhaps the more significant point was that the central leaders of the Chinese Communist Party lacked the strategic confidence to open China's doors to the world and reform its political and economic policies after the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989. Deng Xiaoping, a visionary strategist who created a Chinese neoliberalism with "Chinese characteristics" (Harvey, 2005), became aware of the conservative resistance to China's opening and reform policies of the political and economic system in the central government. Just before the opening of the Fourteenth Plenum Conference of the Chinese Communist Party in 1992, Deng Xiaoping made a trip to the southern cities; these were the cities where the opening and reform policies had

been implemented earlier, and the place where success occurred in the area of economic development. In his speeches, Deng Xiaoping stressed that China's opening and reform policies required more confident and forceful implementation (Chen, 2004). With these policies, the difference between capitalism and socialism should not be an issue, in that a market economy and a planned economy can co-exist in a capitalist and socialist country, like China. The critical challenge became one of finding the best way to develop the productivity of the country, which would eventually improve the economy, and raise people's living standards. Deng Xiaoping further stressed that education was an engine of economic development, and that China's socialist construction and modernizations depended on education, science, and technology (Chen, 2004; Yang, 1995).

In response to Deng Xiaoping's speeches on his southern tour (in the southern cities), the Fourteenth Plenum Conference of the Chinese Communist Party in 1992 supported the notion that in order to realize the four national modernizations, education reform and development needed to be the priority in the larger national strategy of reform and development. So, the main objectives of educational reform and development in the 1990s were to promote Chinese people's comprehensive value on citizenry, culture, and science; these objectives were meant to address socialist construction and the national modernization construction (Gu & Liu, 1994; Guo, 1993; Yang, 1993, 1995).

#### *Guiding Principles Toward a Socialist Construction*

In order to meet the new demands and challenges of the country, on February 13, 1993, the State Education Commission (in the name of the State Council) issued

*“Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development ( 中国教育改革*

*和发展纲要).”* This report became one of the two most important documents

regarding China’s education reform in the 1990s.

At the 14<sup>th</sup> Plenary Conference of the Chinese Communist Party, the Central Committee clearly stated that education reform and development was the first priority of the Chinese government. We must strive to improve all-round quality of the Chinese people to ensure the modernizations of China through quality education. The current education system and practice cannot meet the demands and challenges of the ongoing economic and political reforms. This education reform must be implemented in the light of Deng Xiaoping’s “three orientations,” and educational reform and development must be geared to the demands and challenges of socialist construction and modernization, and globalization (State Council, February 26, 1993).

The guiding principles of the report outlined how multiple reforms could best serve the socialist modernization construction with Chinese characteristics; the educational system and its structure needed to be reformed to meet the needs for establishing a socialist market economy, the political system required reform, and the science and technology system needed to be updated. The guiding principles also offered direction for changing the concept of education; reforming the curricula, teaching contents, and instructing pedagogy; reforming the testing system in elementary, secondary, and high schools; implementing the graduation examination system in general high schools; and reforming the college entrance examination. The overall intent was to eventually move away from the one-sided pursuit of test scores

and promotion ratio, while simultaneously improving the quality of education to promote comprehensive development for Chinese socialist and modernization construction. The new Chinese education must be oriented to the modernizations, to the world, to the globalization, and to the future, instead of being oriented to examinations (Gu & Liu, 1994; Yang, 1995).

The announcement of the “*Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development*” reflected that China’s educational system and reform were designed and implemented to serve both economic and political goals. When these reforms were deepened, the educational system needed to be reformed to meet the demands and new challenges from the socialist construction and the materialization of the modernizations (Cheng, 2004, Gu & Liu, 1994; Yang, 1995). In this announcement, educational development was identified as the first priority in China’s socialist construction and modernization; reform in education was initiated to promote further reform in the socialist market economy, the political system, and the science and technology system.

With the announcement of the “*Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development*,” many circulars, proposals, and directives were geared toward reforming the whole educational system and promoting quality education through assessment reform. This was the first time that the government officially announced the ultimate goal of assessment reform and how it might impact China’s economic and political development. The government believed that all reforms were critical to promoting quality education, including reforms to the following: graduation examinations, college/university entrance examination and admission, curricula,



instruction content, instructional pedagogy, and overall educational concept or philosophy. The government also hoped that these reforms would be helpful in resolving the chronic problems in Chinese education: the one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher-level schooling and the overloaded school burden for students.

### *Toward Quality Education, Again*

From a study of Chinese educational policy documents since the 1980s, the one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher-level schooling and the overloaded school burden for students were two major concepts and themes that were continually overused and over-emphasized. In China's historical, social, cultural, and economic contexts, these two problems have been chronic, and therefore, require ample time to adapt to change (Luo & Wendel, 1999; Suen & Vu, 2006).

In the 1990s, the focus of education reform was on promoting quality education. However, quality education and educational assessment reform were interdependent. Success in quality education reform depended on the solution of the problems in Chinese education. So the Chinese government had to continue the reform of testing policy, to correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher-level of schooling, to reduce students' overloaded school burden, and to work to promote quality education; these continued efforts were meant to ensure the success of China's socialist and modernization construction.

### *More Documentation in Favor of Change*

From 1993 to 1998, the State Education Commission repeatedly addressed these chronic problems when they issued more than 8 circulars or proposals about

quality education, including: *“Directive on Lightening Students’ Over-Loaded School Burden in Compulsory Education Period so as to Promote the Quality of Education”* (1993); *“Proposals on Steadily Carrying Out the Graduation Examination System in General High Schools”* (1993); *“Proposals on Fully Complying and Implementing the State Educational Principles and Missions, and Lightening Students’ Overloaded Burden of Learning in Both Elementary and Middle Schools”* (1993); *“The Proposals on Carrying Out ‘the Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development’”* (1994); *“Circular on Further Promoting and Achieving the Reform of Admission Policies for Secondary Middle Schools”* (1995); *“Circular of Proposals on Fully Promoting the Quality of General High Schools”* (1995); *“Proposals on Actively Carrying out Quality Education in Elementary and Middle Schools”* (1997); and *“Proposals on Carrying out Quality Education, Adjusting Curricula, and Reinforcing Teaching Administration in Elementary and Middle Schools”* (1998). In all of these documents, the majors themes such as “school burden,” “promotion rate,” “quality education,” “socialist construction and modernization,” and “globalization” were repeatedly stated. Through this rhetoric repetition, the government expressed its determination to continue the reform of testing policy, to correct the tendency for one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher-level of schooling, to reduce students’ overloaded school burden, and to promote quality education to best serve China’s socialist and modernization construction. The documents also indicated that the government became aware of the interaction between and among these themes. In these documents, it was clearly stated that secondary middle school admission policy needed to be reformed; such a reform would mean that elementary school graduates

would enter secondary middle school without taking the selective entrance examination at all (Cheng, 2004; Ngok & Kwong, 2003; Yang, 2003). Additionally, it was urgent and imperative for all levels of government to take measures to reduce the pressure associated with test scores and promotion ratio to a higher-level of schooling.

School burden, promotion ratio, pursuit of test scores and testing-oriented education were inextricably intertwined with one and another. To reduce the school burden during the nine-year compulsory education period, policy-makers and schools had to reform testing system on several levels; policies must reduce the significance of the selective entrance examination, the number of both internal and external tests, the number of testing subject areas, and the number of external academic contests (Zhang, 1997; Zhen, 1993; Yang, 1993). Educational proficiency and success should not be based exclusively on student test scores; instead, and more importantly, student attitudes towards society, social intelligence, and many other non-intellectual qualities should also be considered in a more comprehensive assessment of ability (Yang, 1993).

#### *Efforts to Reform Testing Policies in General High Schools*

When nine-year compulsory education was gradually popularized, high school education and the college entrance exam gained more attention. The State Education Commission called for a national effort to implement the graduation examination in general high schools. From successful experiences (in Shanghai, Zhejiang, and other provinces and regions), using a graduation examination in general high school became one of the most preferred ways of assessing learning, instructing, and school

administration. Such an assessment could be used to correct the existing irrational educational assessment that was exclusively based on the promotion ratio; consequently, it would also correct, to a large degree, the tendency for education in general high schools to focus on the promotion ratio for colleges/universities (Li, 1997; Liao, 1997; Man, 1997; Yang, 1993). Because of the changing philosophy of education, and the potential benefits of change, the Commission found it critical to establish a more comprehensive and reasonable educational assessment system for students, teachers, and school administration at the high school level (The State Education Commission: *Proposals on Steadily Carrying out the Graduation Examination System in General High Schools*, 1993).

*Changing Beliefs about Education, Again*

*Lightening school burden and correcting the tendency for promotion ratio.*

The State Education Commission also believed that the key to solving the two chronic problems was to change the educational beliefs about learning and instructing.

Student learning was not the same as testing, elevated test scores and promotion ratio to a higher-level of schooling did not equal quality education (Ma, 1993; Man, 1997; Mo, 2002, Yang, 2004). In order to change the long testing-oriented educational model, to correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate, and to carry out the state educational strategy and mission, all schools had to reduce students' burden on learning. The key to lightening the burden was to reform educational structure, offer students more career options after graduation from elementary school, secondary middle school, and high school, and to reform the nationally unified

testing-oriented educational model in practice (Wu & Luo, 1995; Yang, 1993). At the same time, demands were made to reform curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy. Curricular design and instructional pedagogy would be tuned to the majority of students, instead of focusing on the small group of students who were intended for promotion to a higher-level of learning. Educational bureaus also needed to be more aggressive about pushing entrance examination and admission system reform (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998; Liu, 1997). Test scores and promotion ratio were limited criterion for evaluating student learning, teacher instructing, and school administration; reforms were needed to identify new assessment techniques. Quality education, instead of the test-oriented education, became the priority of the state (The State Education Commission: *Proposals on Fully Complying and Implementing the State Educational Principles and Missions, and Lightening Students' Overloaded Burden of Learning in Both Elementary and Middle Schools*, 1993).

*A stronger hand in comprehensive reform.* Deng Xiaoping's speeches in southern cities encouraged the Chinese Communist Party to implement a more forceful reform in China. As China's reforms in the market economy, the political system, and in the science and technology were deepening, and as the world economy became increasingly and globally interdependent, The Chinese central government became more determined to reform China's educational system (Chen, 2004; Yang, 1995). On July 3, 1994, the State Council stated (for the first time) that Chinese educational reform was dependent on the implementation of a strong strategy; a comprehensive policy was needed to meet the demands and challenges from Chinese market economy reform, Chinese socialist and modernization construction, and

especially from the increasingly global economy. This comprehensive strategy included reform of curricula, teaching materials, instructing pedagogy, and the testing system in *The Proposals on Carrying out the Guiding Principles of Chinese Education Reform and Development* (1994). People were being asked to change what they knew about quality education; that the existing focus on testing and promotion was not quality education (Zhang, 2000). A quality education needed to help cultivate the following skills: critical thinking, strong problem solving, good citizenship, high ethical and moral standards, and other positive qualities. Students who could only test well were not necessarily well-educated, and therefore, might not be competitive and might not be able to meet the demands and challenges from both national economic development and the world global economy (Cheng, 2004; Wang, 1997; Zhang, 2000).

*Changing admissions policies.* The State Education Commission also identified the necessity to further and deepen the reform of the admission policy for secondary middle schools. The Commission argued that the admission policies for both high schools and colleges contributed to the two chronic problems. The reform of the admission policy for secondary middle school was necessary; it would allow China to institute a nine-year compulsory basic education, lighten students' school burden, and promote a quality education in elementary schools (The State Education Commission: *Circular on Further Promoting and Achieving the Reform of Admission Policies for Secondary Middle Schools*, 1995).

As aforementioned, in the 1990s, the reform of educational assessment policy and admission policy attempted to accomplish three objectives: to reduce students'

school burden, to correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate, and to promote quality education for socialist construction and global economy. The State Education Commission reinforced, on June 8, 1995, the notion that reforming the testing system (especially the college entrance examination policy) was the key to national educational reform. Testing reform would help to correct the misdirected focus on a testing-oriented education, would help to lighten school burden, and would gradually improve overall educational quality (Yang, 1993; Yuan, 1999).

#### Documentation for Change

In *Circular of Proposals on Fully Promoting the Quality of General High Schools*, the Commission stressed that to ensure the success of testing system reform and to improve educational quality China had to reform the curricula, the teaching materials, instructing pedagogy, and the whole educational assessment system in high schools. Quality education and educational assessment reform became the dual priorities of educational reform (The State Education Commission, 1995). Over sixteen circulars were issued by the State Education Commission to lighten school burden, correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion rate, and so as to promote well-rounded quality education. Although all these circulars addressed the need for change, they never really identified what the specific changes should be and how these changes would be implemented. The undefined purposes and methods of the reform in these circulars contributed to the failure in resolving these chronic problems.

#### *Higher Education and Promotion Ratio*

In response to the educational assessment reforms in basic education (in alignment with the changes in admission policies for colleges and universities in the 1990s), and in order to meet the increasing demands of the socialist market economy and the changes from globalization, there has been an increasing enrollment of students in higher education (Li, 1997). Increasing enrollment in higher education was also the key to resolving those chronic problems in China's basic education. Problems such as school burden, pursuit of promotion ratio, and testing-oriented instructing and learning largely resulted from ferocious competition for a limited enrollment in higher education. If students, parents and schools could be relieved from this promotion pressure, a quality education that was not testing-oriented could be possible. Through increased enrollment higher education, the Chinese government could also shift the funding responsibility to the local government and families through a decentralizing process in the higher education system. Increased enrollment in higher education was expected to promote quality education; this way, more competitive professionals would be trained for China's socialist construction and for global competition. The central government repeatedly stated that the objective of the elementary and middle schools was not one-sided to prepare students for next level of education through increasing the promotion ratio.

Elementary and middle schools were required to reform curricula, teaching materials, and instructional pedagogy, along with overall educational concepts, and were encouraged to focus on educational activities that would lead to a higher quality of education (Liu, 1997). To serve this end, the State Education Commission issued *"Proposals on Actively Carrying out Quality Education in Elementary and Middle*



*Schools*” on October 29, 1997. In this circular, the State Education Commission put forward a series of suggestions for promoting quality education in elementary and middle schools; they restated the significance of quality education; they urged elementary and middle schools to shift basic education from a test-orientation to a quality-orientation; and they listed some negative consequences of the testing orientation on students, education, and society. In order to implement a quality education, it was necessary to continuously reinforce and deepen the educational reform with respect to curricula, teaching materials, instructional pedagogy, and admission policies to higher level of education (Cheng, 2004; Liu, 1994).

In order to further promote a quality education, the State Education Commission (on February 6, 1998), issued another circular: “*Proposals on Carrying out Quality Education, Adjusting Curricula, and Reinforcing Teaching Administration in Elementary and Middle Schools.*” The Commission clearly stated that the purpose of educational assessment reform was to promote quality education; to expedite the reform, educational bureaus and schools (at all levels) had to reform curricula, teaching contents, and instructional pedagogy. Quality education - an education that was efficient and effective-- was important for the well-rounded development of the Chinese people, for national economic construction and development, and was desperately needed for China to be competitive in the global economy (Yang, 2004).

#### Concluding Reform in the 1990s

Educational reform in the 1990s focused on reforms of testing policies in both the graduation examination and entrance examination at both secondary middle

school and high school levels. Again, reform was aimed at promoting a quality education for the demands and challenges of the nation's modernizations and the world global economy. When China attempted to reform testing policies, additional reforms in the areas of curricula, teaching content, instructing pedagogy, and educational philosophy were also initiated. Both educational assessment reform and curricular reform were designed to improve educational quality. The ultimate goal of educational reform was to best serve the demands and challenges of socialist construction and modernizations in an increasingly global economy (Yang, 2004). Unfortunately, China's educational reform was still far away from reaching the goals and global success, which was evidenced in the China's continuing efforts toward reform in the new century (Yang, 2003). The chronic consequences of high-stakes testing evolved from the Civil Service Exam (Suen & Vu, 2006), while the traditional value of education, the conflict between the huge population and the limited educational resources, and other issues in China contributed to the difficulties in this quality-oriented education reform.

### Quality Education Reform in 1999

#### *Documents for Critical Change*

The Chinese government regards the year of 1999 as a milestone for Chinese educational reform. In this year, three principal documents regarding educational assessment reform and quality education were issued by the Central Committee, State Council, and the Ministry of Education. On March 13, 1999, the Ministry of Education issued *Proposals on Deepening the Reform of the College Entrance Examination and Admission System*. The Ministry of Education stated that the

guiding principles of the college entrance examination reform were: to help promote the notion of a quality education for socialist construction and economic globalization, to provide more qualified students for higher education, and to increase the autonomy of colleges and universities in higher education. Through reforming the college entrance examination system, a national quality education was expected. To re-emphasize past proposals, the Ministry repeated that the reform of curricula, the reform of teaching materials and instruction pedagogy were necessary.

*Reform with a Specific Agenda, Finally*

*Model 3 plus X.* For the first time, the Ministry of Education specifically designed and introduced an agenda to reform test subject areas for the college entrance examination (Cheng, 2004; Yuan, 1999). The Ministry of Education suggested that within three years, a new model for testing subjects would be implemented: the model of 3 plus X would be used - Chinese, Math, and English were required, and the candidates were allowed to choose one or more additional subjects from the followings: Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Politics, History, and Geography (decisions would be made in accordance with the requirements of a specific college). This type of change in subject matter was meant to reduce students' school burden, to release teachers and schools from school-promotion pressures, and to promote a well-rounded, humanistic quality education; the ultimate goal was to prepare competitive human resources for China's socialist and modernization construction in the global economy (The Ministry of Education, 1999). China had been preparing to participate in the World Trade Organization since the early of 1990s, and this reform for quality education could expedite materialization in

globalization of Chinese economy (Yang, 2004).

*Assessment reform and more.* On April 27, 1999, The Ministry of Education issued the “*Circular of Directives on Reforming Graduation Examination and Entrance Examination in Secondary Middle Schools.*” The Ministry stated that the purpose of this reform was to implement “the 21<sup>st</sup> Action Plan to Vitalize Chinese Education,” and to capitalize on the quality education plan in the new century. In order to correct the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion ratio and to change the test-oriented educational model, the existing educational assessment system in secondary middle schools needed to be reformed. The reform of the graduation examination and high school entrance examination in secondary middle schools (in addition to the reform of curricula, teaching materials, instructional pedagogy and the whole assessment system) would help to establish a reasonable and scientific educational assessment system, would help promote a quality education, and would eventually assist in easing students’ school burden (The Ministry of Education, 1999). More important, the reform of educational assessment system would promote reform in instruction pedagogy and curricula, which would release both students and teachers from testing pressure, and be encouraged to move to a creative study. A creative study focused on students’ creativity, logical thinking and problem-solving ability, which was highly required for internationally competitive talents in global economy.

In addition to the proposal of other initiatives, 1999 was a significant year in China’s educational reform because this was the first time that the government defined the contents, goals, and the strategies to achieve the goal of quality education.

The world economy is increasingly globalized. The international competition in world economy is increasingly intensified. The key to win in the global economy lies in advanced technology and science, and internationally competitive talents. China has to reform the current test-oriented education to promote a quality education. Quality education must be oriented to modernizations, to the world, and to the future. Quality education must be oriented to all students at all levels. Quality education must be oriented to improving students' logical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Quality education should not be oriented to testing and promotion rate. In order to achieve quality education, quality education reform must be directed by Deng Xiaoping's thoughts and theory on both economic and educational reforms. More flexibility should be given to local government, education bureaus and schools. More educational funding should be added. This funding responsibility is in local governments. Curriculum, instructional contents, and instructional pedagogy must be reformed. Educational assessment must be reformed. Teachers must receive more professional training...(The Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council, June 13, 1999).

The central government suggested that China had to continue the educational reform to promote a quality education. Internationally, the knowledge economy and the accelerating development in science and technology made the global economy more competitive. The quality and quantity of human resources in a nation are critical to its competitiveness in the global competition. The quality of education equates to the quality of human resources (Zhang, 2000). At home, China's reform was in a critical time for establishing a socialist market economy system and realization of the

modernizations. China needed quality human resources in both the socialist market economy and modernization construction, and to compete internationally with those economic powers. But the key to achieving the quality education for China was to change Chinese people's educational philosophy, and to reform the current educational system, its educational structure, the instructional content, and instructional pedagogy (Zhang, 2000).

*Comprehensive change.* Furthermore, to promote quality education, all aspects of Chinese education needed to be oriented to modernizations, to the world, and to the future. The instruction needed to be oriented to the majority of students, and to the well-rounded development of students, rather than to only a small group of students who were intended to succeed in college/university entrance exam. Instructional emphasis needed to shift away from testing and needed to be focused instead on student creativity, problem solving ability, as well as critical and logical thinking (Chen, 2004; Yang, 2004). Reforming college/university admission policy was also essential in promoting quality education. The testing policy reform needed to be implemented alongside the reforms of curricula, instruction content, pedagogy, and change of educational concept, philosophy, and value; these changes would help in reducing students' school burden, and correcting the tendency of one-sided pursuit of promotion for a higher-level of schooling, thus promote a quality education for global competition in a knowledge economy (The Central Committee of CCP & The State Council, *Decisions on Deepening and Reinforcing the Education Reform, and Fully Promoting Quality Education*, 1999). It was clear that the chronic problems of school burden, testing-oriented instructing and learning, and one-sided pursuit of

promotion in China's education resulted from many issues. A comprehensive reform involving curricula, instruction pedagogy, educational foundations, and testing policy was essential to solve these chronic problems.

### Reform Trends in the New Millennium – 2000 and Beyond

#### *College Exams and Admissions Policies*

College/university entrance exam and admission policy reform remains (in 2007) the central issue in China. Since 1989 until today, the central government has stated many times that educational bureaus, schools, and governments at all levels must be determined to carry out the educational reform in college entrance examination (Hao, Tan & Wang, 1998; Yang, 2003). From 1995 to the current time, the central government repeatedly stated that the success of the college entrance examination depended on continuing the reform of testing subject areas, the testing contents, the actual testing form, and college admission policies. The ultimate objective of the reform of the college entrance examination was to promote quality education for national economic development and for the global economy (Gu & Liu, 1994; Zhang, 1997). However, this objective, due to China's cultural, social, political and economic contexts, has not yet been met after over twenty years' efforts. This objective continues to occupy the forefront of Chinese educational reform in 2007.

#### *Documenting Trends*

In the new century (from 2000 until 2007), additional policy initiatives have been adopted regarding educational assessment reform and quality education. The Central Committee, the State Council, and the Ministry of Education issued many circulars/proposals to help guide educational assessment reform and curricula reform.

The most important ones included: “*Circular of Guiding Principles on Curricula Reform in Basic Education*” (06-08-2001) by the Ministry of Education, “*The State Council’s Decision on Reforming and Developing Basic Education*” (2001) by the State Council, “*Circular of Directives on Reforming Basic Education and Educational Assessment*” (08-16-2002) by the Ministry of Education, “*The Central Committee’s Decision on Many Issues to Establish and Reinforce the Socialist Market Economy System*” (2003) by the Central Committee, and “*The Action Plan to Vitalize China’s Education during 2003-2007*” (2003) by the Central Committee. These proposals stressed the Chinese Communist Party’s strong determination to reform China’s educational assessment system, to reduce students’ school burden, to check the tendency of one-sided pursuit of test scores and promotion rate, and to promote a quality education for national economic construction, social development, and the national competitiveness in the world’s global economy.

Despite the repeated emphasis on educational reform with the same tactics, and despite circulars and groups that aimed to give reform direction, the ultimate goals for Chinese education reform for quality education were continually unmet in these series of top-down education reforms. The chronic problems of overloaded school burden, the one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher level of schooling, and testing-centered teaching and learning remain in 2007. The circulars or proposals repeatedly issued in the central government are tangible resources that reflect the ongoing struggle toward reform and educational quality. The phenomenon in China’s education reform also implied that although the Chinese political system was traditionally a centralized regime, localism also played a decisive role in policy



implementation. Deng Xiaoping's neoliberalism in reforming China's political system, economic system, and educational system further decentralized the traditionally highly centralized system, and strengthened the localism in China.

### Conclusion – Decades of Reform

Since the reinstallation of the college/university entrance exam in 1977, two chronic problems and their consequences still remain in 2007: students' school burden and one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher level of schooling. These two problems have been in co-existence for centuries in China (Suen & Vu, 2006). The two issues further reflect Chinese educational ideology and philosophy. To government, education was a powerful means for political centralization and unification. Apple (2004) argued, "Education was not a neutral enterprise, that by the very nature of the institution, the educator was involved, whether he or she was conscious or not, in a political act" (p. 1). Education was also designed for China's economic development and modernization. Roger Dale (1981) argued that education, technology, and economic growth were interdependent:

...Schooling critically affects the level of economic growth and progress through its link with technology. The level of technological growth is taken to determine the level of economic growth and is itself seen to be dependent on the level of schooling. The educational system provides personnel both to push back the frontiers of technical knowledge and to consolidate these advances and bring them into our everyday lives. (p. 2)

Many Chinese people also believe that education and the success of the exams are effective in achieving and maintaining personal and family socio-economic status,

reputation, and other privileges. Both government and individuals hold a kind of utilitarianism value on education. The influence of education on both the individuals and the state was well described by Roger Dale (1981):

The education system is seen as providing a ladder and an avenue for social mobility, implementing objective selection procedures for the establishment of a meritocracy, in which the only qualification for personal advancement is “ability.” The education system becomes the key mechanism of social selection, to the benefit of both society and the individual. (p. 2)

Educational utilitarianism was best expressed in education policy-making of the Chinese Communist Party after Mao’s death. Deng Xiaoping and other Communist Party leaders repeatedly reinforced the notion that China’s education needed to be adjusted to serve China’s economic development, socialist construction, and modernizations. This spirit (neoliberalism) was reflected in the reinstitution of the college/university entrance exam in 1977 after the Great Cultural Revolution; Deng Xiaoping’s educational reform theory regarding the “three orientations” in 1983 and his speeches in the southern cities in 1992; and the Chinese Communist Party’s educational reform initials in “Decision” in 1985; “Guiding Principles” in 1993; and “Decision” in 1999.

As China’s market economy reform was deepening, and the world economy was becoming increasingly interconnected, the Chinese government envisioned that the traditional educational system, structure, educational assessment, instruction contents, and instructing pedagogy were no longer meeting new demands and challenges. The Chinese government decided to reform the traditional testing-oriented

education to a more quality-oriented education. Quality education was designed for the majority of students and was focused on the well-rounded development of students with regard to citizenship, creativity, problem solving ability, logical thinking, and other skills, which would help make students more competitive in the global economy. The key to realizing quality education, according to the central government, was to reform testing policy and curricula. The reform of the curricula, instruction contents and instructional pedagogy, the reform of testing policy, the promotion of quality education, and the changing of the traditional educational philosophy and values were essential in solving the two chronic problems: students' school burden and one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher-level of schooling. These two chronic problems in China's education were still in existence after decades of reform efforts because the other educational issues were never successfully resolved.

In the 1980s, education in China had been identified as an education, which one-sidedly pursued the promotion rate. In the 1990s, education was called test-oriented (Yang, 2003). In the 21st century, Chinese leaders, such as Chen Zhili (the former Minister of Education) and Jiang Zeming (the former Chinese President) repeatedly addressed the continuing issues of students' school burden and promotion rate for higher level of schooling. Several circulars addressed the ongoing problems; however, despite these circulars, proposals, decisions, and speeches by public leaders, those terms about the problems in education have become powerless political clichés, in that educational practice in China continues to be far away from the government's goals.

## Summary of China's Education Reform

China's education reform was targeted at a quality education, an education required for China's socialist construction. Chinese educators and policy-makers agreed that China's education should not be test-oriented. Creative and critical thinking, responsibility, citizenship, and other desired qualities for China's socialist development should be stressed in education. Policy-makers agreed that if students' test scores were overemphasized in decision making, students might be more prepared to take tests, and less prepared for performance in the global economy. Chinese educators and policy-makers believed that test-oriented education interfered with the progress toward a quality education in that the pursuit of higher test scores, and the pursuit of a higher promotion rate increased students' school burden, and caused other unintended consequences. With a long history of value on educational testing, the Chinese education reform for a quality education remained a great challenge after two decades of effort. For a better understanding of this challenge in this research, readers need to understand why these political clichés were repeated so frequently in reform documents. Through presenting these terms, the researcher intends to convey the following perspectives regarding China's testing policy reform.

Two of the biggest issues that China continuously faced were the notions of students' school burden and the pursuit of promotion rate. These chronic problems were influenced by many different factors and continued, despite documentation of attempts to change them. Second, the political clichés in educational reform documentation and discussion reflected Chinese government's utilitarianism ideals. The repetition of reform terms has made them empty and powerless, and has led to

the ineffectiveness of this top-down reform movement. In addition, the failure in policy implementation reflected the localism gained more power in the centralized system. Deng Xiaoping heavily influenced China's policy-making strategies within educational reform; positive efforts included the reinstallation of the college/university entrance exam, educational reform in the 1980s (e.g. nine-year compulsory basic education) and the 1990s (e.g. strategies for quality education), and his theory about the "three orientations," including his "speeches in the southern cities."

Despite the use of similar terms, there were several different perspectives and opinions of policy-makers, educators, and other groups, so China's educational reform has consistently lacked continuity. Even when there was consensus in direction, the bureaucracy and inefficiency of the political system failed to provide concrete suggestions and strategies to realize true educational reform; policy-makers did not have defined goals and did not have the opportunity to put forth specific objectives for the reform. Additionally, China's educational reform was initiated and implemented from the top - from the central government, to the bottom level (local government, educational bureaus, and schools). There were big disparities between policy-making and policy-implementation. These disparities came from differentiated interpretations of reforms and the goals.

The repetition of China's problems and inconsistencies also occurred because China's basic education was funded by the local government. Schools took the orders or policies from the local leaders or local government more seriously than the policy from the central government, so the local visions had more impact. The Chinese

central government's efforts were met by setbacks from the local government. The central government, the local government, schools and teachers, and students and parents have different interpretations of "quality education," which has resulted in different approaches toward different goals.

Not only did the local government have a strong impact, but so too did the political and economic structures at the time. Utilitarianism in education played an important role in China educational reform. Historically, China's educational reform was geared to meet the demands and challenges for both political and economic development. These demands and challenges kept changing, so did the goals of educational development. However, Chinese people's traditional interpretation of educational value remained relatively unchanged. This educational tradition and culture, where success on exams would bring successful life, has been test-oriented for thousands of years. Consequently, when the government realized that the traditional educational philosophy and standards did not meet the demands of a new political and economic system and therefore, needed to be reformed, change was met with strong resistance from the people.

Because of a changing economic status, China's educational assessment reform was strongly geared to its economic development. Restoration of the college/university entrance exam was targeted at selecting the talent for economic construction. The strategy of the nine-year basic education attempted to promote Chinese people's education level for the modernizations. Through reforming the testing system and curriculum, China intended to promote quality education for a knowledge economy and global competition. The test-oriented education, which

stemmed from the traditional educational concepts and values, as well as the instructional content, and the instructional pedagogy, continues to provide a big challenge for this reform. Also, China's education reform for quality education was largely geared to meet challenges from increasing globalization.

#### 2007 - Political, Social, and Cultural Challenges to Reform Efforts

##### *The Politics of Higher Level Schooling*

In 2007, there are still many challenges in reforming testing policy and in implementing quality education in China. In comparison with the traditional test-score-based assessment, it is not easy to assess the quality of education by alternative means. Schools, teachers, and parents have questioned how to evaluate students' citizenship, creativity, problem solving ability, and critical or logical thinking for a higher-level of schooling. Although the Chinese government continuously and dramatically expanded the enrollment of students in college education since 1999, high school graduates still need to take the selective college/university entrance exam and not all graduates can go to college. The college/university entrance exam is based on instructional contents and materials used in high school; test scores were the primary method of determining who is qualified for college education, and what kind of college a student might attend. Consequently, schools, teachers, students, and parents were less interested in the notion of a quality education when there was pressure for school promotion. Additionally, many local government officials pressured schools and teachers to raise the promotion rate for college education, in that the promotion rate weighs heavily on these local officials' office evaluation for promotion. If schools failed to increase the promotion rate, the school principals

might lose his or her job, and school funding might be cut off. All these problems were a result of the contradiction between China's gigantic population and the limited available educational resources. These two issues led to a chronic educational dilemma: students' school burden and one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for higher-level of schooling, but the necessity of competitive exams in a system that is highly selective at the secondary and especially tertiary levels. These two chronic issues reciprocally affect the reform of testing policy, the reform of curricula, the reform of the whole educational system, and the ultimate goal of obtaining a quality education for the new knowledge economy and globalization.



CHAPTER FOUR  
EDUCATION REFORM IN THE U.S. SINCE 1980:  
FROM EQUITY TO EXCELLENCE

Overview

“For over a century and a half, Americans have translated their anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for educational reform” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 1). The American people often disagree about the purposes of public education. For decades, the tension between educational excellence and equality has been a central theme for American policy-makers and educators with regard to American educational development (Cremin, 1987). Patrick Mc Guinn (2006) described the complicated implications of American public education as follows:

Education is a fascinating and complex subject because it is intimately connected to children, jobs, taxes, religion, race, and class in other words, to many of the most important vexing issues confronting government and society. Since the founding of the United States, public education has been identified as the central means by which the country can promote social

cohesion, civic virtue, and economic development. In the twenty-first century, social fissures, civic apathy, and the competitive pressures of the global economy have only enhanced the importance of education to our nation's well being. (p. ix)

As Mc Guinn disclosed, the central point of this ever-lasting debate was the purpose of American public education: citizenship for a democratic society, or a quality education for economic development in globalization. The balance of educational excellence and equality has continuously changed in educational policy-making.

#### The 1950s - 1970s: An Education for All

##### *Documenting Equal Rights*

Despite the continuing shift in policy focus, the desired balance between educational excellence and equality has been a primary goal in educational policy-making since the 1950s. A major catalyst for equity education in the 1950s was the *Supreme Court's* decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Brown's immediate target was the racial desegregation of students, yet "its language of justification and its force as a legal and moral precedent encouraged not only blacks but other groups as well to demand educational equity as right" in the U.S. (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 26). In the 1960s, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson led the initiative that asked U.S. policy-makers and the general public to realize that schools must be made more accessible to children in poverty, children with special needs, and various other groups of children who were yet to be readily accepted in the schools. Many programs and several types of legislation were initiated to help facilitate school

access for these groups of underserved children, including: Head Start, Title I, The Bilingual Education Act, and The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (Jennings, 1995). Immediately after the passage of the Elementary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), President Johnson declared that, “expanding full educational opportunity ... will help five million children from poor families overcome their greatest barrier to progress - poverty” (Jeffery, 1978). In 1966, the Coleman report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, was published; this helped to promote an increased federal responsibility in funding schools, thereby creating programs to compensate for students growing up in disadvantaged circumstances.

### Educational Quality and Equity

#### *Increased Opportunity and Decreased Motivation*

Federal involvement and policy-making in education between 1965 and 1974 were considered controversial and ambiguous due to two chronic issues - educational quality and educational equity (Lazerson, 1987). On the one hand, educational data showed that dropout rates were higher and academic achievement did not improve as much for minority and poor students. On the other hand, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores (a manifestation of school effectiveness and educational quality) declined between the mid 1960s and the 1970s. Besides the decline in SAT scores, the conclusion that American school performance declined was also based primarily on evidence from scores on other standardized tests:

The existence of a sizable drop in test scores during the 1960s and 1970s has been well-known for some time. This decline was remarkably pervasive, affecting many different types of students in most grades, in all regions of the

United States, in Catholic schools as well as public schools and even in Canadian schools. The drop was apparent in the results of different kinds of tests covering many subject areas. (Congressional Budget Office, 1987, pp. 12-13)

However, this report did not catch nearly as much attention from the public, as the report of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983. At the end of the 1970s, the call for American education reform for excellence was already on the rise. Some educators accused that the excellence in American education initiated in the 1950s of competing against the former Soviet Union was destroyed by the reform for equality education in the sixties and seventies, although many people still thought that American education was fine. Some educators argued that in a highly diverse society, American education, especially high school education, just attempted to accommodate the needs of different groups (Powell, 1985). This accommodation for a diverse student population was a great achievement for American education.

Between the 1950s and 1990s, many colleges and universities were founded, and the ferocious competition among institutions of higher education led to lowered admission standards and requirements to ensure adequate enrollment (College Entrance Examination Board, 1994, pp. 4-5). Furthermore, “open enrollment” policies of many state colleges and universities made it easier for high school graduates to enroll in a higher-learning institution. American students, compared with their peers in other nations, spent less time on school work, appeared less motivated to learn, and were not under as much pressure as their peers to attend college.

## Educational Quality in the 1980s and 1990s

### *A Nation at Risk*

In the 1980s, the debate shifted from the question of equal educational access and equality to the question of educational quality (Jennings, 1995), so the focus of educational policy-making shifted back to an emphasis on quality education. These concerns were publicized in the ground-breaking work entitled, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a report of the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world...The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people... Others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5)

In a global context, American education, compared to that of other developed nations, declined. This decline in American education directly threatened the security of the U.S., due to global competition. According to the National Commission on Excellence in Education, many indicators of the decline of American public education were already well-documented. For example, evidence of the decline was evidenced in international comparisons of student achievement completed a decade ago, which revealed that on 19 academic tests, American students were never first or second; in comparison with other industrialized nations, they were last seven times. Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests was lower in 1980

than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched. Additionally, over half of the population of gifted students did not match the tested ability with comparable achievement in school. In terms of specific tests, the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) demonstrated a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980. More specifically, the average verbal scores fell over 50 points and average mathematics scores dropped nearly 40 points. Both the number and proportion of students demonstrating superior achievement on the SATs (i.e. those with scores of 650 or higher) also dramatically declined. There was a steady decline in science achievement test scores of 17-year-olds in the U.S., as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973, and 1977. And, finally, the decline in education was affecting business and military leaders who complained about costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading writing, spelling, and computation (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9).

According to this report with the above references, the decline in educational quality was reflected in student test scores, which continued to decline. From reading this discourse, it seemed that the National Commission on Excellence in Education believed that the quality of education could be measured in numbers, or student test scores. If students' test scores improved, the school performance and the education quality would be accordingly improved. So, *A Nation at Risk* ultimately began the standards-based educational reform that increased testing practices in American education. Numerous politicians, business leaders, and educational professionals wanted improvement, so standards and accountability became top priorities in American educational reform.

### *America 2000 and Goals 2000*

*National standards.* In September of 1989, President George H.W. Bush, Governor, (and later president) Bill Clinton, and governors of other states, convened in an historic Education Summit at Charlottesville, Virginia; here they agreed to set specific education goals for the nation. Working together, Bush and Clinton advocated for national standards for public schools and national tests for students; their efforts resulted in the creation of the first standards-based reform initiative in American history: *America 2000* (1991). Based on the initiative of *America 2000*, President Clinton had *Goals 2000: Educate America* enacted into law by congress in 1994. There were also two national educational summits where state governors were encouraged to raise state standards through the creation of a competitive curriculum, by raising expectations and graduation requirements, and through improved standardized or proficiency-based tests, which was intended to promote student educational success (Jennings, 1998).

### State Standards in 2000 and Beyond

#### *The No Child Left Behind Act*

This effort of education standards-based reform peaked when *The No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) was signed into law by President George W. Bush in January of 2002. The *NCLB Act*, which reauthorized the ESEA, incorporated the principles and strategies proposed by President Bush. These included increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools; more flexibility for states and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the use of federal education dollars; and a stronger emphasis on reading, especially for the youngest children.

*Accountability.* For accountability, the *NCLB Act* strengthened *Title I* accountability by requiring states to implement statewide accountability systems covering all public schools and students. These systems needed to be based on challenging state standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3-8, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. Assessment results and state progress objectives would be broken out by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group was left behind. School districts and schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals would be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring measures aimed at getting them back on course to meet state standards.

However, the *No Child Left Behind Act* further assured conservatives that this standards-based reform would move away from national standards and tests and towards unique state standards. *NCLB* did not allow for the federal government to oversee the quality of state education standards and assessment, and further, the federal government was forbidden from interfering with state standards and curricula (Kosar, 2005).

### Implications of Standards-based Reform

#### *Political Controversy Over Reform Direction*

The standards-based educational reform also provoked an intense political debate over various issues: the control of public schools, the definition of standards, the validity of testing, funding, and many other educational issues. Some business, political, and educational leaders believed that the public schools were not doing a



good enough job of educating children; setting higher educational standards and administering more tests were deemed necessary for improved performance. Liberals believed that improving educational opportunity through increasing funding for the schools should be the priority of the reform. Some conservatives were concerned that setting national standards would increase federal influence over the schools, which would limit some control by local school districts and state governments (Jennings, 1998). All of these issues can be traced back to the chronic debate in American education: educational quality or educational equity? Is educational quality compatible with the notion of equity or are the concepts contradictory in both policy-making and implementation?

### *Federal Influence*

Educational standards were not the main point of debate. Federal officials saw standards as necessary for promoting quality education and considered political implications when designing and implementing standards. The concern about an increased federal influence over the public schools became a central point in educational debates. As a political system, the United States had “a very decentralized system of public education, with as many as 14,000 local school districts, and with varying degrees of state level influence over education” (Jennings, 1998, p. 183). The idea of setting higher standards for public schools led to some confusion about the direction of the standards and testing initiatives. Many conservatives were willing to accept higher academic benchmarks for public schools, but they did not want so much federal influence over schools. President Bush explained the goals and direction for national standards and tests in 1991 as follows: “Washington can help by setting

standards, highlighting examples, contributing some funds, providing some flexibilities in exchange for accountability, and pushing and prodding – and then pushing and prodding some more” (U. S. Department of Education, 1991, p. 2). President Clinton (1997) called for national standards and tests, and explained that higher standards would not come true “unless we get out here and beat the drum for it and work for it” (p. 79).

Although public representation made it clear that the federal government was only required to assist in the prodding for school improvement from a national level and was not required to maintain control over the public schools, the government was not able to alleviate all conservative concerns. The different political forces made the process more complex for schools that were trying to set national standards and design appropriate tests.

#### *Global and Economic Implications*

The belief that American education was in decline also seemed to be supported by the decline in the rate of growth of American economy, and increased economic competitiveness of Europe, and especially nations in the Pacific Rim. The decline in public education quality coincidentally happened when preeminence of the U.S. “in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation was being overtaken by the competitors throughout the world” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 6). This concern over the decline of American public education was “rationally” connected to the new challenges confronted by the nation:

The time is long past when America's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of national resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products, but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 6)

In terms of globalization and international competition, the U.S. was no longer secure if its educational system was failing to provide competitive human resources through quality education. As the report stated, as the world becomes increasingly globalized, the abundance of resources and geographical location (the U.S. is geographically separated by oceans from potential enemies) would no longer be sufficient in bringing security to the United States. The decisive force for this global competition relied heavily on quality human resources and quality education. In the above-cited paragraph, the National Commission on Excellence in Education made it clear that the preeminence of the U.S. "in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation" was attributed to its "abundance of national resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 6). The loss of this preeminence in world competition and the global economy was the result of the idea that "the world is indeed one global village" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 6). Traditionally, the

U.S. advantages included resources, geographical location, American people's enthusiasm, technology and science; these advantages were threatened and challenged by those "determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors" in this "global village." It was technology and information advancement that minimized the geographical boundaries and cultural barriers, which were previously significant challenges to multi-national corporations and inter-cultural communications.

Since the U.S. lost the overwhelming advantages of abundance in resources and its geographically-isolated security, knowledge and innovation became crucial for success in the global marketplace. American policy-makers believed that the quality of education (reflected in test scores) was critical to innovation and development in technology and information science. When American test scores declined (especially in math and science) and when they were compared with those of other developed nations, policy-makers drew the conclusion that the previous pre-eminence of the U.S. "in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 6) was in serious danger. From this discourse, it could be concluded that in a global market, excellence in education was the strategy to win this global competition.

In reading the report, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* embraced the belief that the increasing globalization heavily influenced the education reform. They stated numerous concerns that were further supported by other facets of globalization. At the time, the Japanese, Koreans, and Germans seemed to be more innovative, more competitive, and more productive in the global economy. Not only did these cultural groups score higher on international math and science tests than their American

counterparts, but they also produced and marketed better products and services. In terms of automobiles and electronics, the Japanese products were trusted by the public as being more reliable and more advanced; the South Koreans were able to make better products with lower inputs; and Germans' advanced skills in making machine tools allowed Germans to be more competitive (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Harvey (2005) believed that neoliberal reforms of Deng Xiopang and Ronald Reagan contributed to an economic boom in the Pacific Rim by enabling entrepreneurs to earn money without the burden of government regulations. (add more about this Harvey comment) *A Nation at Risk* furthered this purpose by emphasizing educational excellence over educational equality. States were identified as the generators of educational excellence. It was evident in this discourse that the writers of the "report" held that the accomplishments achieved by these competitors could be traced to a competitive quality education, a high standard in math and science education, and a passionate dedication to math and science education. It was the high standard and quality education that made these nations more competitive.

The risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than Americans and have government subsidies for development and export. It is not just that the South Koreans recently built the world's most efficient steel mill, or that American machine tools, once the pride of the world, are being displaced by German products. It is also that these developments signify a re-distribution of trained capability throughout the globe. Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled

intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce, and are spreading throughout the world as vigorously as miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did earlier. In order to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefits of all - old and young alike, affluent and poor, majority and minority.

(National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7)

Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence were vital in a knowledge economy, with global competition, and with regard to international commerce. However, this is where Americans were falling short in meeting the demands of the new global economy. It was evident that globalization and internalization steadily challenged America's pre-eminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation. If American public education was unable to provide competitive intelligence, Americans would not be able to compete, according to this policy document. Not surprisingly, businessmen, policy-makers, and some education leaders placed blame for the decline of American education on public schools, which failed to provide this quality education. Coincidentally, with the decline of U.S. school performance came a "long-term decline in educational achievement" and recession in economic development. Americans became frustrated by "a steady 15-year decline in industrial productivity, as one great American industry after another falls to world competition" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 6). Consequently, the American President, governors, policy-makers, businessmen, and some education leaders believed that

educational reform for improved school performance should be the priority of policy-making. The key to solving the problem of the rising mediocrity in American public education was to increase education standards.

*The Backlash from A Nation at Risk*

*Educational reform – a comprehensive remedy.* *A Nation at Risk* might be a part of a larger trend in U.S. education policy; however, it stirred up a national concern about the quality of American public education. Tyack and Cuban (1995) stated that the American people had a strong faith in public education: “Repeatedly, Americans have followed a common pattern in devising educational prescriptions for specific social or economic ills” (p. 2). The application of standards to solve educational and economic problems was not a new strategy. According to Callahan (1962), Darling-Hammond (2004), and Tyack (1974), urban school systems in the U.S. have periodically applied standards (student test scores) to reward or sanction schools or teachers since the mid-1800s. Darling-Hammond (2004) argued that many states and districts, after the issue of *A Nation at Risk*, attempted to implement the standards-based reform through similar strategies: using student test scores as the basis for promoting students, tracking students, making graduation decisions, and rewarding or sanctioning teachers. Therefore, this educational reform, from the beginning, was standard-based and quality-oriented. Ideologically and politically, Michael Apple (2004) argued that the standard-based and quality-oriented education reform in the U.S. resulted from the influences of both neo-liberals and neo-conservatives who agreed that educational policy should be “centered around the

economy, around performance objectives based on a closer connection between schooling and paid work” (p. 174).

They see schools as connected to a marketplace, especially the global capitalist market, and the labor needs and processes of such a market. They also often see schools themselves as in need of being transformed and made more competitive by placing them into marketplaces through voucher plans, tax credits, and other similar marketizing strategies. (Apple, 2004, p. 174)

Apple (2004) further argued that under the influence of neo-liberalism, schools, students, and education were treated as both consumers and products at a vast supermarket where students were “sold and bought in the same way everything was bought and sold” (p. 186). Apple did not seem to believe that this approach would resolve the problems in American education. He agreed with Henry Levin (1977) that “educational policies that are aimed at resolving social dilemmas that arise out of the basic malfunctioning of the economic, social and political institutions of the society are not amenable to solution through educational policy and reform” (p. 26). Proponents of standards-based reform believed that higher standards could check both instruction and learning, and make it possible and feasible to compare American students with students from other nations, and most importantly, to measure educational efficiency or effectiveness in a quantitative way. Increasing the significance of testing would also be helpful in holding teachers and students accountable for learning and instructing.

*Content-curriculum.* According to the findings made by the National Commission on Excellence in Education: the “mediocrity” of American public



education was reflected in the four important aspects of the educational process: content-curriculum, expectations, time, and teaching. The first two aspects - unchallenged curriculum and low expectations - were the primary concerns:

Secondary school curricula has been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses, students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to “general track” courses in large numbers. The proportion of students taking a general program of study has increased from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979. This curricular smorgasbord, combined with extensive student choice, explains a great deal about where we find ourselves today. We offer intermediate algebra, but only 31 percent of our recent high school graduates complete it; we offer French I, but only 13 percent complete it, and we offer geography, but only 16 percent complete it. Calculus is available in schools enrolling about 60 percent of students, but only 6 percent of all students complete. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 18)

In this report, the authors argued that the curriculum did not create enough challenge for students, or that there were some challenging courses, but students avoided taking them. American school curriculum content lacked challenge because there weren't any competitive education standards applied to the curriculum. Even when courses were held to higher standards or were more competitive, students were not well motivated to take these courses; there were no competitive standards to

measure school performance, no standardized expectations, and no competitive requirements set for promotion and graduation.

Regarding the unchallenging content in curriculum, Powell, Farrar and Cohen (1985) suggested that because “Americans will never completely agree on educational purposes” (p. 306), American high schools would “make numerous and different accommodations with students to achieve the result of everyone desires” (p. 1). These accommodations to diversity were made through a multitude of understandings or bargains among teachers, parents, students, and administration, and were generally accepted by the community. Powell, Farrar and Cohen (1985) believed that American high school, with respect to its diversity and different accommodations in curriculum to meet various requirements, was “the shopping mall high school” in an educational market. They argued that the shopping mall curriculum worked well, and it accommodated the needs and requirements of all consumers.

In most communities and for most students, the mall works well because it is so exclusively governed by consumer choice. Learning is voluntary: it is one among many things for sale. The mall’s central qualities - variety of offerings, choice among them, and neutrality about their value - have succeeded in holding most teenagers on terms they and their teachers can live with. (p. 309)

Powell, Farrar and Cohen (1985) failed to mention that the curriculum-content in public high schools was not rigorous enough; however this might be inferred from their conclusions that the shopping mall high school curriculum was the result of

consumerism in a marketized education system and their educational equity philosophy which focused on educational accessibility to all people.

However, Berliner and Biddle (1995) countered the accusation that the curriculum-content in American public schools was low. Berliner and Biddle argued that the report of *A Nation at Risk* was a manufactured crisis in American education by a “prestigious committee under the direction of then Secretary of Education Terrel Bell and was endorsed in a speech by President Ronald Reagan” (p. 3). Although the report made many claims about the “failures” of American education, and how those “failures” were confirmed by “evidence”, none of the supposedly supportive “evidence appeared in the report, nor did the report provide citations on where that “evidence” might be found (p. 3).

*Low standards and expectations.* Besides the lack of challenging curriculum content, the standards and expectations were also low. The report attributed student reluctance in taking these challenging courses to lower standards and to the lower requirements and expectations held by schools, teachers, policy-makers, parents, students, and the public. On the one hand, the National Commission on Excellence in Education defined expectations as the level of knowledge, abilities, and skills that school graduates are expected to possess for graduation and admission to a higher level of schooling. High standards and high expectations would motivate students to work harder. On the other hand, the Commission also emphasized expectations that students needed to dedicate to school, including “the time, hard work, behavior, self-discipline, and motivation” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 19). High standards and requirements elicited more student dedication to school. In

addition, the findings regarding the lower standards and expectations were also made in a comparison with the standards and expectations of some other industrialized nations, such as Japan and Germany. Due to the low standards and expectations, students did not spend enough time on schoolwork. They also avoided taking demanding courses that required more time and skills.

The decline in performance is evident in several aspects of public education. First, the amount of homework for high school seniors has decreased (two-thirds of students report less than one hour of homework per night). Second, average student achievement has also declined, despite the fact that grades have improved. Third, in many industrialized nations, courses in mathematics and science start in grade 6 and are required for all students. In those nations, the actual time spent on these subjects is about three times that of even the most science-oriented U.S. students.

Additionally, in 1980, only eight states required high school foreign language instruction, but none actually required students to take the courses. Thirty-five states required only one year of mathematics, and 36 states required only one year of science for a diploma. Furthermore, in 13 states, 50 percent or more of the units required for high school graduation were allowed to be electives chosen by the student. And finally, “Minimum competency” examinations (as of 1983 required in 37 states) fell short of what was needed, as the “minimum” tends to become “maximum,” thus lowering educational standards for all. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, pp. 19-20)

According to this report, American high school students, compared with those of other developed nations, did not utilize their schools effectively to learn from

demanding courses of study. American high school students were offered a diversity of courses and most of them opted for academically simple courses for graduation with a high school diploma. In contrast, their peers in many other industrialized nations, were challenged by difficult and required courses in advanced mathematics biology, chemistry, physics, and geography, beginning in grade six. The time spent on the difficult subjects, was also drastically higher than the time spent by even the most science-oriented U.S. students. The implications of this phenomenon were interpreted by Powell, Farrar and Cohen in *The Shopping Mall High school* (1985). But the authors of the report complained that, “‘Minimum competency’ examinations (required in 37 states) were very weak, thus lowering educational standards for all” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, as cited in Gordon, 2003, p. 180).

*Parent accountability, involvement, and support.* Behind this practice, there was a continuing debate over the interpretation of quality education in the U.S. What was the purpose of American education--to promote American democracy, to train human resource for economic development, or to promote personal social mobility? Actually, American education was expected to meet all three of these goals simultaneously. To these questions, David Labaree (1997) believed that most Americans thought education provides both *private good* by helping individuals get ahead with an educational credential, and *public good* by “producing citizens who are politically responsible and workers who are economically productive (p. 2).” Labaree argued that the *private good* of education - the pursuit of individual advantage “has come exert an increasingly powerful effect on education in the United States, and that

in the process private purposes have undermined the ability of the public schools to serve the public interest (p. 2).” A major consequence of this change is that American education was undergoing a transformation from public service to private service, and American education was increasingly consumerism-and-credentialism-driven. This consumerism and credentialism in education was undercutting learning and perpetrating social inequality. Under this influence, “in both college and high school, students are all too well aware of that their mission is to do whatever it takes to acquire a diploma, which they can cash in on what really matters - a good job (p. 259).”

Therefore, the debate over which goal should be the primary priority triggered instability of educational policies, as well as other implications in policy-making and implementation. Students and teachers were at the mercy of politicians, business leaders, and some educational “specialists”. However, teachers and students were held accountable for school performance. If students were not taking school seriously, if parents believed that education was the responsibility of the school and parents were not cooperating with schools and teachers with regard to the direction of the education, then what could schools and teachers do? No matter how good the school policy or the intentions of school reform, it was difficult for schools and teachers to implement the school reform. What is more, the parents’ involvement and support of their children’s schooling was closely connected to their socio-economic status. With regard to personal responsibility in making reform happen, the report indicated:

The task of assuring success of our recommendations does not fall to the schools and colleges alone. Obviously, faculty members and administrators,

along with the policy-makers and mass media, will play a crucial role in the reform of the educational system. But even more important, is the role of parents and students, and to them we speak directly. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 34)

The critical role and responsibility of parents in supporting a child's education and learning finally became evident to all who read *A Nation at Risk*. Parents were given the responsibilities of monitoring their child's study by encouraging diligence; encouraging their child to take more demanding courses so as to nurture his or her curiosity, creativity, and confidence; and encouraging their child to cultivate good study habits. Without this important parent involvement, teachers and schools were powerless in improving student school performance alone.

*Low requirements and low expectations.* Furthermore, the report also suggested that the lower requirements and lower expectations in public schools could be attributed to decreased selectivity of college admissions, and declined quality of instructional materials. On the one hand, many selective colleges and universities lowered their admission standards; on the other hand, many professors complained that the newly recruited college students were not ready for a college education, especially in math, science, reading, and writing. Many colleges and universities spent an excess of resources on remedial and college preparation courses. Furthermore, there were only a few experienced and qualified teachers involved in textbook writing and designing. The textbook writing in the U.S. was commercialized and was therefore, in the control of some business and education specialists. Besides these issues, the lower requirements and lower expectations seemed to discourage

students and allowed them to spend an inadequate amount of time in the classroom, on schoolwork, and on homework, compared to students from other industrialized nations. For example, according to *A Nation at Risk*, U.S. schooling could be characterized by the four main ideas. First, the typical school day lasts 6 hours and the entire school year is only 180 days long, compared to the 8 hour school days for 220 days in other countries. Second, the time spent learning how to cook and drive counts toward a high school diploma just as much as the time spent studying mathematics, English, chemistry, U.S. history, or biology. Third, some schools provided students with only 17 hours of academic instruction during the week, while the average school provided about 22 hours, and British schools provided 30 hours. Lastly, a California study of individual classrooms found that some elementary level students received only one-fifth of the instruction time that others received in reading comprehension. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, pp. 21-22)

The National Commission on Excellence reported that American students did not spend an adequate amount of time on schoolwork, which was required for a quality education. Unfortunately, and in many instances, this inadequate school time was not well planned and was not utilized for instructing and learning, which was a further detriment to the quality of education. Additionally, American education was also undermined by a kind of “cafeteria style curriculum, in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 18). Courses like driver’s education, shop, and cooking, were chosen by students over alternative challenging courses in math,



science, or English; these more difficult courses might have helped U.S. students to be more competitive with their international peers.

Regarding these problems in American education in the report, Berliner and Biddle (1995) argued that they were a “manufactured crisis.” The real problems of American education were not in lower test scores, lower standards and expectations, unchallenging curriculum content, less school time and parents’ involvement, and lower quality of faculty. The real problem in education was a chronic one, which was that “opportunities are not equal in America’s schools. As a result, the achievement of the students in schools that cater to the rich and the poor in our country are also far from equal” (p. 5). These problems resulted from societal, economic, racial, cultural, and political issues that were pervasive in the idealized equal American society.

Apple (2004) believed that the underachievement problem in the U.S. was interpreted from a neoliberal perspective. The neo-liberals saw “schools as connected to a marketplace, especially the global capitalist market, and were designed to meet the labor needs and processes of such a market” (p. 174). American public school was blamed for its economic difficulties in a global market in the 1980s. This neoliberal philosophy in education largely contributed to a major problem of consumerism and credentialism in American education (Labaree, 1997).

#### *Documented Recommendations to Reform American Education*

To solve these problems in American education, the crucial steps were to raise course requirements, increase expectations for student performance, increase parents’ involvement, and improve the overall standard of American public education. The standards-based reform would focus on competitive curriculum design, student

dedication to schoolwork, and increased expectations and accountability for students, teachers, and parents. The National Commission on Excellence stated, “We must demand the best effort and performance from all students, whether they are gifted or less-able, affluent or disadvantaged, whether destined for college, the farm, or the industry” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 24). All students needed to be encouraged and were to be held to the rigorous standards and requirements for grade promotion, graduation, and college admission.

*Five new basics.* In terms of curriculum content, the National Commission on Excellence stressed that state and local high schools had to raise and strengthen graduation requirements in the “Five New Basics” which included: (a) four years of English, (b) three years of mathematics, (c) three years of science, (d) three years of social studies, and (e) one-half year of computer science (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983). In addition to the Five New Basics, the Commission also addressed some other important issues regarding curriculum construction, such as foreign language proficiency and continuing efforts in science.

In terms of standards and expectations, the Commission believed that curriculum content standards should be integrated with performance standards and expectations, and clearly stated that:

We recommend that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission. This will help students do their best educationally with challenging materials in an environment that supports learning and

authentic accomplishment. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 27)

*Higher expectations.* To achieve a quality education in the U.S., American public schools needed competitive international educational standards and higher expectations from schools, teachers, parents, and students. In other words, American students needed to take more tests, and perform well on these tests. Raising education standards and expectations was the key to reforming American education. In addition to curriculum content and standards, the Commission also called for involvement of parents and students in school, improvement in teacher quality and instruction skills, and leadership and fiscal support for an improved school performance.

#### *Challenges to Reform*

*Highly decentralized schools.* First, the Commission could not offer any specific, directive, or universally accepted standards, because American public education, like American society, was highly decentralized and resistant to centralization. Just as Glazer (2003) remarked:

American public education is based on the building block of thousands of school systems, and the fifty states, alongside which are hundreds of independent teacher-training institutions, textbooks, test-materials, and other educational-product producers, associations of teachers and administrators and educational specialists, influential foundations, public oversight and reform groups, and on and on. (p. 154)

The decentralization was sustained by different powerful ideologies and centralization was resisted by and decried by powerful interest groups, all of which

declared that they were seeking the best local school system for their children. The federal government's involvement in education was not "anything like meaningful national curricula or meaningful tests - these were left to the states or non-governmental organizations" (p. 156).

*The ongoing standards debate.* Second, the use of student test score in decision-making triggered heated debate over testing and standards. The advocates of testing believed that such reform could motivate students to learn and would help to hold schools and teachers accountable for progress, so as to improve educational quality (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Ravitch, 1995; Resnick L. & Nolan, 1995; Resnick L. & Resnick D., 1982; Smith, 1995; Tucker & Coddington, 1998). Those who disagreed with this idea thought that quality education could not be measured or interpreted *only* by student test scores. In other words, student test scores were not seen as being equivalent to a quality education and this practice would have negative consequences on students (Mc Neil, 2000; Ohanian, 1999; Shanker, 1995;Sizer, 1995; Stewart, 1995). Furthermore, a student's test scores were closely related to his or her socio-economic status (Coleman, 1966). Students from lower social classes might be punished unjustly because of lower test scores. Though they may work equally as hard as other students, the inadequate educational resources places them at a disadvantage when trying to compete academically with students from wealthier families with more educational resources. Therefore, this significant differential in resources really undermines the ideology of educational equality (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

*A new global context.* Furthermore, this education reform was initiated and implemented in a global context, so the challenges and obstacles that this more recent educational reform encountered, were somewhat different from previous reform attempts. This reform was implemented in different historical and social contexts, no previous educational reform in the U.S. had so strongly held schools and teachers accountable for improving student school performance via the interpretation of test scores. In previous educational reform, the focus was on preparing students for industrialization and manufacturing business in the U.S. Marketable skills were stressed, rather than academic test scores (Gordon, 2003; Kirst, 1998). Due to the economic transition from a manufacturing economy to a knowledge and information economy, student test scores would be used to reward or sanction teachers, schools, and students; some people believed that educational quality could be measured by numbers or student test scores (Kirst, 1998). This educational reform, influenced by globalization, identified educational standards that could be used to assess student school achievement. These standards were designed to match international standards. A new axiom being used by politicians, educators, and business leaders was that the world competition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was actually the competition of professionals and talents. Only world-class education with world-class standards would prepare world-class talent and professionals. World-class educational quality was to be measured and interpreted by student test scores (Long, 1984). Additionally, this educational reform involved chronic and rooted issues, such as centralization vs. decentralization (Glazer, 2003), and quality education vs. equality in education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Finally, this educational reform was initiated in an age

when America's superiority was being challenged and threatened by competing nations, and education was expected to play a crucial role in providing resource advantage in a knowledge and information economy (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). So this type of reform was very different from previous reform strategies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*Problems have deep roots.* Some critics also argued that American education was doing well regarding those chronic issues confronted by American society and schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). They argued that all crises in the report on American public education were groundless and manufactured (1995). They believed the real problems for American education were not in underachievement and in lower standards, but in social and racial inequalities. The education standards-based reform could not necessarily solve those problems rooted in American society. This standards-based reform might dissolve some of those social and racial problems in existence (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Gordon, 2003).

#### *Education Reform in the Wake of A Nation at Risk*

Despite these unprecedented challenges in reforming American education, and despite the differentiated perspectives and interpretation of the problems in American public education and the types of reform that would be most beneficial, *A Nation at Risk* created a strong national response; it was reported that, a year after *A Nation at Risk*, 35 states had enacted or approved changes in graduation requirement for high school graduates and 13 states were still considering requirement changes. Twenty-two states had already enacted some reform in curriculum, and 23 states were in the process of considering curricular reform. These states also agreed that it was

imperative to increase student testing and evaluation. Twenty-nine states had enacted new policies regarding student testing, while 13 states were considering such policies in 1984 (Grossman, 2003). Although *A Nation at Risk* also addressed issues such as status, salaries, qualities, and standards of teachers, the response to the report was primarily geared toward how to increase educational standards and improve educational quality.

After *A Nation at Risk*, the federal government made comprehensive efforts to improve American schools. In addition, 44 states had responded in some way to the challenge of the report, by supporting or defining academic standards for all students and by measuring student knowledge in core subjects at various grade levels (Riley, 1995). *A Nation at Risk* triggered a series of educational reforms across the nation. President Bush was impatient with the school reforms of the states in the 1980s that the Reagan administration began, in that the U.S. economy became increasingly globalized and felt the increasing challenge and pressure from other nations in global competition. President Bush (1991b) thought the education reforms were “much too slow and too timid” (p. 648). The nation was putting effort into improving education, but the results were unsatisfactory. Furthermore, globalization made the U.S. lose its power over international competition. Other industrialized nations and some developing nations were doing much better than the U.S., and the U.S. education system really needed to catch up to those nations (U.S. Department of Education, *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, 1991, p. 5).

Meanwhile, the nation’s governors agreed with President Bush that educational changes needed to happen fast enough to meet the new challenges from

globalization. They agreed to seek a wider and more systemic reform in American schools in the early 1990s (Jennings, 1998). In 1991, the National Governor's Association announced:

We need many more examples of motivation and reforms to serve as models for educators. But system wide change is essential. Our challenge as governors is to restructure the entire system to substantially raise the performance of *all* children and *all* schools in order to achieve the national education goals. (p. v)

Since the 1980s, and with the support of the state governors, states began to initiate change through laws mandating more stringent high school graduation requirements and academic standards for both students and teachers. The national education goals were set for *all* children and *all* schools. A set of national standards and graduation requirements were necessary for improving school performance.

Besides the president and government officials, the business community also pronounced their impatience over the pace of school reform and school improvement. "Consequently, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Alliance of Business, the Business Roundtable, and other national groups pressed more and more for a results-oriented system and not one based on specifying all the requirements for a good education" (Jennings, 1998, p. 11). In short, business leaders advocated that educational reform should be based on a school's "outputs," instead of "inputs." They interpreted effectiveness of a school system by student test scores, which reflected whether or not students, teachers, and schools met the standards and requirements.



Rigorous standards and requirements were designed to help ensure the quality of public education in the U.S.

*Governors' Education Summit and America 2000*

In 1989, President H.W. Bush and several governors held a “National Education Summit” in Charlottesville, Virginia, where they announced the goals for American education. When the President and the governors met, they agreed that the American schools needed clear national performance goals, and consequently, they also needed an earnest state-by-state effort to improve school performance in order to attain these goals. The accomplishment of national goals also needed national standards and national testing.

However, in fear of opposition in the legalization process, the Bush administration started voluntary national standards and tests by encouraging the involvement of various professional fields to create the standards, and thereby, avoided federal control. At an educational summit in the fall of 1989, President Bush and several governors agreed to establish national education goals. This plan, called *America 2000*, announced in April of 1991, was initiated for establishing future national standards and assessments for quality education in the U.S. In June of 1991, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) was established to create “a broad bipartisan consensus about national standards and testing,” “to advise on the desirability and feasibility of national standards and test,” and to “recommend long-term policies, structures, and mechanisms for setting voluntary education standards and planning an appropriate system of tests” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 139). NCEST emphasized that standards must reflect high expectations, provide focus

and direction, and must be national; standards also must be voluntary, not mandatory, must include multiple assessments and not a single test, and must be developmental in assessing progress rather than static. However, *America 2000*, which was developed from goals outlined at the summit in 1989, was not passed.

Specifically, these goals were codified as *America 2000* in 1990, and included several strategies to improve education. Primarily, the U.S. would establish a process for setting national education goals. Also, they would seek greater flexibility and enhanced accountability in the use of federal resources to meet the goals, through both regulatory and legislative changes. With these goals, the nation would be asked to undertake a major state-by-state effort to restructure the education system and would be required to report annually on progress in achieving the goals (*America 2000, An Education Strategy*, p. 73).

One of the most important aspects of this strategy was that it initiated and supported academic standards for American education. This strategy meant that all children in America would begin school prepared and ready to learn. By the same token, this strategy was designed to improve the high school graduation rate, which was designated to increase to at least 90%. Essentially, the reform direction would ensure that American students would leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America would ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

Besides those significant efforts, the overall reform strategy identified goals that would help U.S. students gain first place in the world in science and mathematics achievement. This goal was further supported by the proposed ideal that every adult American would be literate and would possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy; they would also be expected to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Additionally, a standard that could be linked to every other was that every school in America will be free from drugs and violence, and will offer a disciplined environment that is conducive to learning. (*America 2000, An Education Strategy*, p. 9)

*Effects on globalization.* Most of the items above implicitly connected academic standards to globalization. American student readiness for learning needed to be assessed according to a certain set of international standards, and the standards would tell what students need to know and how much they already know, and if they meet the requirements for grade promotion. Most importantly, these standards would help ensure a quality education which would allow American students to be more competitive in the global economy. Standards for the four core subjects were critical to a competitive quality education. Thus, it was the increasing global economy and international competition that pushed American education to competitive international standards. It was argued that the decline in the quality of American education resulted from the lack of competitive educational standards, which negatively affected the competitiveness of the American economy in the global world.

*Social, economic, and political effects.* According to Kosar (2005), a nation-state's economic prosperity and health was dependent on the educational levels of its citizens. He added that the health of the U.S. system of representative democracy was contingent on the education level of the citizenry. The representative democracy required some direct citizen involvement. The higher the educational attainment, the more probable it was that a citizen would participate in democratic activities. It was also evidenced that lower academic achievement was highly correlated with the following: crime, poverty, and teenage pregnancy (Jenks & Phillips, 1998).

The authors of *America 2000* implied that the lack of educational standards contributed to the decline in educational quality, which was reflected in the decline of student test scores on the SAT or ACT, a lack of skills and knowledge necessary for graduates to effectively do their jobs, and an increase in the number of remedial courses and programs. This academic under-achievement caught national attention from the public, businesses, and the government for several reasons. Educational level has also been closely related to individual earning power; education benefits both individuals and society in these respects. David Bills (2004) argued that successful job performance in the postindustrial era would demand more of the “complexified” mental attention of workers than the “routinized” work required in industrialized age (p. 111). The postindustrial world required broader and deeper understanding of the society and job were connected and of how to develop and maintain interpersonal and technical relationships (p. 111). In the post-industrial era, Bills argued that education still needed to be focused on the three goals explored by Labaree (1997) - democratic citizenship, social efficiency, and social mobility. The

neoliberal view of education and economic development resulted in consumerism and credentialism in education, which focused on education marketplace and individual social mobility. Therefore, the debate over standards and quality of education in America was closely tied to many political, economic, and social issues.

*National strategies are up for debate.* *A Nation at Risk* exposed the under-achievement problem of American students, and fueled the intense debate over education reform for a quality education. George Bush - the “education president” - with the support of governors, the business community, and other leaders, catalyzed the process of this education reform through initiating “national goals, national standards, and national tests to measure progress towards those standards” (Jennings, p. 9) for the first time in American history. The test was used to measure whether or not the standards and goals had been met (Ravitch, 1995), so as to improve the quality of American education.

In addition to strategies of national goals, national standards, and national tests, the Bush administration used “parental choice as part of a strategy that emphasized ‘excellence’ over ‘equity’” (Carl, 1994, p. 301). Carl argued that the parental choice reflected the New Right legacy in policymaking in which both the new-liberal and the neoconservative emphasized market and authoritarian principles in education reform (p. 297). The neoliberal marketplace-oriented perspective seemed to be in contradiction to the strategies of “national goals, national standards, and national tests”, because the liberals believed that “state intervention doesn’t work, all alternatives to markets are deeply flawed; government failure is more prevalent than market failure; government intervention is unjust (Gamble, 1986, p. 38, as cited in

Carl, 1994, p. 298).” But these national goals, standards and tests were voluntary, and these issues were in control of local government. Parental choice was regarded as “the resolution for a variety of problems facing educators, parents, students and business” (Carl, 1994, p. 321). The shift of education reform from equal access in the 1960s and the 1970s, to individuals’ competing in education markets since the 1980s reflected neoliberals’ ideology of connections between education reform, market economy, and globalization; this caused education to evolve as a market business, which consequently resulted in consumerism and credentialism in education.

*A Nation at Risk* aroused the public’s concern about public education, and the education reform was considered necessary. But as a highly decentralized society, American schools were in the control of the local community and the local government, and there existed a great variation in curriculum from school district to school district, and from state to state. An agreement could not be reached about which reforms American schools needed or how to implement the reform. Initiated by George Bush and several state governors, a reform proposal focusing on national standards, national tests, and national goals was developed. But the standards-based educational reform proposal triggered heated debate in the U.S. Responses to the proposal could be categorized into two distinct groups: one side was against national standards and assessments, and the other side was in favor of national standards and assessments (Ravitch, 1995).

The main concerns over national standards and testing were designed around the federal government’s expanded control of local schools. This perspective expressed the contradictory view on education reform of the neoliberals and the

neoconservatives. Both groups insisted that education reform should link to global economy and be put into marketplace for better achievement and efficiency. They believed that standards, testing and goals were necessary to assess school achievement and efficiency. But they remained suspicious of central government intervention into local schools (Gamble, 1986).

Therefore, for opponents of the national standards and national testing movement, Ravitch (1995) provided many different reasons for this perspective:

Some object on principle to any effort to establish national standards, even voluntary ones, rejecting the presumption that there is value in uniformity. Others fear that any standards controlled by a federal agency cannot long remain voluntary, because of the federal government's power to coerce compliance by withholding funds. The critics range from conservatives, who have always opposed expansion of the federal role in education, to liberal, who fear that meaningful standards will cause poor children to fail or drop out of school. (pp. 18-19)

Some critics warned that if, "the federal government gained control over curriculum and testing, it could impose political and ideological conformity" (Ravitch, 1995, p. 19). The national standards and testing might hurt intellectual freedom because federal or state government agencies might settle some issues by giving official sanction to certain ideas, values, and policies. Diversity and intellectual freedom were dynamics of the U.S. society (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

Some critics also worried that national standards and testing might narrow the curriculum and reduce teaching to test preparation activities (Jones & Hargrove,

2003; Mc Neil, 2000). If the test results were to be used for student promotion or graduation, teachers would spend too much time coaching students to practice with test materials and information. Teaching to the test would corrupt teaching practices, the actual test, and the test results (Mc Neil, 2000). Teaching to a particular test was considered detrimental to educational quality because the narrowly designed standardized tests led teachers to “drill their students on right answers, rather than to teach a deep understanding of the concepts involved” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 21).

Liberal critics argued that, “national standards and assessments will not expand equality of opportunity” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 22). They complained that, “national standards and national assessments would neither improve the achievement of minority students nor reduce achievement gap between minority and non-minority students” (p. 22). On the contrary, rigorous standards and national testing might discourage minority students from learning; the lack of educational resources would place them in an unfavorable situation where they would be forced to compete with those students who had more educational resources (Ohanian, 1999). National standards and national tests alone would not solve the problem of low performance of the students in inner-city schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Orfield & Wald, 2000). The implementation of standards and tests needs to be supported with additional resources.

Ravitch (1995) acknowledged that the U.S. had educational standards, but these standards were “the incidental result of disparate decisions made in a variety of states and localities about tests, textbooks, and teacher preparation” (p. 28); they were set up by “colleges, private testing organizations, state-mandated commercial tests,



commercial textbooks, individual teachers, state or local graduation requirements, or a combination of the above” (p. 28). Even in the same school there might be different standards for different students, depending on expectations. So there was a problem: “...there are many standards and the standards are set to be low, unchallenging, and inconsistent” (p. 28). The existence of different educational standards in the U.S. was the result of the nation’s strong tradition of local control and decentralization. The debate over the necessity of national standards and assessment and the interpretation of quality education, thus, has been closely tied to this tradition.

Therefore, supporters of national standards and national tests argued that standards “can improve achievement by clearly defining what is to be taught and what kind of performance is expected” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 25). With well-defined standards and expectations, teachers would know what students should learn and how to measure student learning. Students would also clearly understand what standards they needed to reach, and teachers would work to help them meet the defined standards and expectations. Parents were also more aware of what was expected of their children, teachers, and schools. With the cooperative efforts of the schools, teachers, students, and parents, improving the quality of education could be possible (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Resnick L. & Nolan, 1995; Smith, 1995; Tucker & Coddington, 1998).

As a decentralized society, national standards would also “provide a valuable coordinating function” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 26). Without explicit standards, “the pieces of the educational system operate without coherence and often are at odds with each other” (p. 26). Clearly defined standards would promote coordination among various

parts of the educational system, in order to enhance student learning. Teachers were to prepare their teaching in the light of standards; textbook writers followed standards in writing teaching materials for schools; college and universities used standards to prepare teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Smith, 1995; Tucker & Coddling, 1998), and testing experts could also “use them as the basis for tests that children will take to determine whether or how well they have met the standards” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 26).

The supporters of the national standards and assessment also argued that, “standards (national, state, and local) are necessary for equality of opportunity” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 26). Quality education should be accessible to all American children. Regardless of socio-economic status, race, school district, and neighborhood, students should have equal educational opportunity and should be held to high performance expectations. The national standards and assessment would ensure that *all* students in *all* schools would have access to challenging programs and courses of study (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Jennings, 1998; Smith, 1995; Ravitch, 1995; Tucker & Coddling, 1998).

Supporters further stated that, “there is no reason to have different standards in different states, especially in mathematics and science, when well-developed international standards have already been developed for these fields” (Ravitch, 1995, p. 27). American society is, comparatively, a mobile society. Standards and assessments would help to ensure that students could be evaluated appropriately and that they will have access to a quality education regardless of their state of residence. Because of increasing globalization and the need to compete, American education

needed to be geared toward an international standard (Jennings, 1998; Smith, 1995; Ravitch, 1995; Tucker & Coddling, 1998).

Standards and assessments would hold students and teachers accountable by supplying accurate information for parents and the community with regard to student school performance. Standards could be used to inform schools and teachers what is expected of them, and assessments would provide them information about how well expectations had been met (America 2000, 1991; Jennings, 1998). Simultaneously, with standards and assessments, students knew what they needed to do to achieve in school, and whether they were making progress or not. National standards and assessments, which were made and compared in reference to those of developed nations, were necessary (Jennings, 1998).

#### *Goals 2000 - Continuing Efforts of America 2000*

The significance of the Bush administration's reform efforts was not undermined by the failure to achieve enactment of this legislation. In the decade prior to the summit of leaders and experts, *A Nation at Risk* did not achieve substantial and measurable improvement in American public education (Jennings, 1998). President Bush, governors, business leaders, and some education critics, reviewed the concepts of national standards and national assessment again at a national summit. The Bush administration's effort toward national education standards, "launched what may well be an historic development in American education" (Ravitch, 1993, p. 153). As a highly decentralized society, America, "unlike most other modern societies, has never established explicit standards as goals for student achievement; those nations that do

have such standards view them as an invaluable means of ensuring both equity and excellence” (p. 153).

The Clinton administration, taking lessons from the Bush administration’s failure of *America 2000* in Congress, technically made it clear that following the identified national standards was voluntary. The Clinton administration was also alert to the influences of the neoliberals and neoconservatives in education reform who quarreled over market-based reforms and government interventions (Carl, 1994). It was also decisive that both houses of Congress were controlled by the President’s party and the public support for education reform initiated in *America 2000* (Boehner, 1995). The Clinton administration created the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), which was a federal agency that would be employed to certify the national standards proposed by specific organizations. Simultaneously, the Clinton administration also codified the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), which would serve the following purposes: to prepare a “national report card” that would report on the progress toward the educational goals, to nominate members of NESIC, to review the decision of NESIC, and to accomplish other responsibilities that would facilitate realization of educational goals (Kosar, 2005). Clinton’s proposal bears substantial similarities to the proposal that was agreed upon by governors in 1989, which was contained in *America 2000* by the Bush administration. Clinton’s initiative, *Goals 2000*, contained the following purposes:

To improve learning and teaching by providing a national framework for education reform; to promote the research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels

of educational achievement for all students; to provide a framework for re-authorization of all federal education programs; to promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards and certifications; and for other purposes. (*Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, p. 1)

By the year of 2000, American education, through raising education standards, requirements, expectations, and other systematic reforms, was designed to achieve the following national education goals:

- School Readiness. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.
- School Completion. By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
- Student Achievement and Citizenship. By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.
- Teacher Education and Professional Development. By the year 2000, the nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills, and will have the opportunity to

acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.

- **Mathematics and Science.** By the year 2000, students in the United States will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
- **Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning.** By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate, and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy; they will exercise the rights and responsibilities inherent in American citizenship.
- **Safe, Disciplined, and Alcohol-Free Schools.** By the year 2000, every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, the unauthorized presence of firearms, and alcohol, and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.
- **Parental Participation.** By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. (Ravitch, 1995, pp. 187-192, cited from the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*)

The passage of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* represented a significant shift in federal education policy. The shift was motivated by a growing understanding that “fundamental educational change is not only desirable, but necessary to the economic, social and political well being of the nation” (O’ Day, 1995, p. 99). The passage of the act also reflected the Clinton Administration’s attempt to launch a systemic reform of American education, by providing a unified vision and goals, coherent instructional policies, a restructured system of governance, and resource

allocation (Smith & O' Day, 1993). *Goals 2000* set high standards and high expectations for American schools, and these standards and expectations applied to all children. The goals also attempted to identify a coherent and supportive policy structure with a clear vision of teaching. The restructured governance led to a top-down reform strategy focused on centralized decisions about standards and assessments, with standardized implementation at the state and local levels. More importantly, the federal government financially supported the reform.

With the approval of the legal system, and with the support of nation's major business and education organizations, the Clinton administration assisted states in raising the quality of American public education through calling for "the development of national standards for education, for tests to measure the achievement of those standards by students, and for monetary aid to states and local school districts" (Jennings, 1998, p. 111). Though the national standards and tests were voluntary, the standards-based education reform continued the efforts of several previous groups who had already tried to improve American student school performance through rigorous standards, high expectations, and graduation requirements. Meanwhile, the Clinton administration's standards-based education reform effort alerted Americans to the declining quality of public education, and the importance of resolving this underachievement problem in American schools. As Richard Riley, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education (1993), said:

We need high standards. In an international market and information century, countries that meet world-class standards will have the edge. This bill will help to establish internationally competitive standards so communities and

states can, if they wish, gauge their curriculum and instruction against those that are world class. (Press Release, *Clinton, Riley Aim Complaints at House Democrats for Changing Administration's Goals 2000 Legislation*, 1993, p. 1, as cited in Jennings, 1998, p. 52)

In this press release, Riley stressed that a comprehensive, systemic, and sustained school reform was the key to solving the underachievement problem and for improving schools and student performance. This discourse also implied that the standards-based reform in the U.S. was geared to an increasing globalization. Globalization increasingly appears to be a driving “force reorganizing the world’s economy,” and the main resources for the global economy are “increasingly knowledge and information” (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002, pp. 1-2). Knowledge and information are essential to the development of America’s global economy. Therefore, globalization increased America’s emphasis on standards, testing, and on meeting standards through education reform (Carnoy, 2000). The high standards, with more testing in education, would improve the quality of education, which was the key to America’s competitiveness in global economy.

The legislation and implementation of *Goals 2000* also paved the way for the initiation and enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of the Bush Administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the year of 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was issued, many American groups agreed that the quality of American education was declining and believed that the underachievement problem needed to be resolved through education reform. But, they could not come to an agreement on exactly *how* to reform American education. *A Nation at Risk* proposed raising education standards by creating more



challenging curriculum, increasing the number of tests, raising expectations and graduation requirements, spending more time at school and in completing homework, and improving teacher quality. However, the report did not provide a timetable or specific goals for the reform. From 1989 to 1997, the two American presidents, George Bush and Bill Clinton, began reform efforts by advocating for national standards for public schools and national tests for students. With the two education summits, state governors agreed to raise educational standards in various states and worked to develop tests that would ensure that students met the new standards. Consequently, this was the direction of the reform efforts. Many American people gradually realized that standards were important for American education; however, the debates about educational standards continued. The Department of Education put forth the rationale for using standards for school reform:

All students can learn more than they do presently. Too many children and youth receive a watered-down curriculum, and suffer from expectations that are too low. The nation needs clear standards of what all students should know and be able to do and clear statements of what it will take to provide all of them the opportunity to meet these standards. (*How Goals 2000: Educate America Act Will Work*, 1993, p. 2, as cited in Jennings, 1998, p. 52)

Requirement for higher standards and more testing was an international trend in education reform in globalization (Carnoy, 2000). From a document study of education reform in the U.S. since 1983, a discourse of the influence of globalization was pervasive. Accordingly, much of the education reform movement in the United States stressed standards for students since *A Nation at Risk* was issued. With the

passage of *2000 Goals: Educate America Act*, “all states have begun the process of creating standards for student learning, new curriculum frameworks to guide instruction, and new assessments to test student knowledge” (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1). However, even though both the Bush administration and the Clinton administration called for these new reforms, business, political, and educational leaders, under challenges from globalization, still thought that the public schools were not doing well enough in educating children; higher standards and increased accountability were necessary. Because the implementation of standards and tests were voluntary, there were no explicit measures to monitor the implementation of the reform policy. In other words, teachers, schools, and students were not held accountable for meeting the standards and expectations. Neither teachers nor schools would be sanctioned if they failed to make yearly progress, and students were not retained from grade promotion or graduation if they failed to meet standards and expectations. The problem, according to advocates of standards and accountability, was still in America’s decentralized system: The decisions about education were still influenced by “a myriad of actors and agencies at all levels inside and outside the system, each with its own goals, interests, and timetables” (O’Day, 1995, p. 101).

#### *No Child Left Behind Act*

*A Nation of Risk* fueled increasing public concern about the decline of American public education and its impact on the nation’s economic competitiveness in global economy, which initiated a standards-based education reform for improved school performance by rigorous standards, testing, individual choice and accountability measures. The progress of this standards-reform was slowed down by

various political forces, including opposition from teachers unions. At the end of 1980s, education was regarded as essential to both individual and national economic progress, and education reform attracted more attention from government and public. Though *America 2000* received the supports of moderates, it ushered in more federal role in education reform. Bill Clinton played a decisive role in “moving the standards and choice movements forward and in laying the ideational foundation for a new federal education policy regime” (Mc Guinn, 2006, p. 199). Bill Clinton expanded the federal role in education and reinforced the idea of improved student academic performance through imposition of standards and accountability measures. However, due to the strong opposition from the right and left, the federal government was not given any effective tools to force states to make recommended changes. So, the reforms in 1994 “largely stopped at encouragement” (p. 181). As a result of the great flexibility and discretion in policy-making and implementing, the compliance with the laws’ requirement was far below from what was expected - “as of spring 2002, only sixteen states had fully met the requirements of the 1994 law” (p. 181).

When President Bush entered office in January 2001, he tried to keep his promise to increase federal spending on education and federally mandated testing in schools. Both politicians and the public, regardless of the partisanship, were increasingly concerned about education and reform. As Kosar (2005) described, “It seems like you are always seeing stories in the newspapers about how bad the schools are doing, how low the tests scores are. Parents see this and they are concerned” (p. 187). Some senators agreed that, “educational achievement was less than it ought to be, especially for many low-income and non-white children. Many schools were

under-serving their students. Education standards in the schools were too low, and federal power had to be used to raise them” (p. 187). The new Bush administration took educational reform as a priority for the presidential agenda, and emphasized “higher standards, increased accountability, and expanded testing” (p. 186). Bush believed that there needed to be more federal funding and more state accountability to solve the underachievement problem. But federal funding needed to be connected to accountability and school improvement. Federal funding was accessible only to those schools who met the requirement for progress in school performance.

*Title I: Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* was the main vehicle of the Bush administration’s standards-based educational reform. Initially enacted in 1965, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* was amended in 1994 with “Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA)” by the Clinton administration. President Bush urged that consequences (e.g. rewards or sanctions) should be attached to student performance on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). However, Bush did not have the federal government create standards. Instead, he agreed that the control over curricula should remain in the hands of the state and local governments (Kosar, 2005).

The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002 ensured “that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (*NCLB*, 2002, Part A, Subpart 1, Sec. 1001).

*Annual testing of students.* The most important requirements in the *No Child Left Behind Act* were that states must set up and adopt academic standards to guide

their curricula design, and create a testing and accountability system that was aligned with those standards to ensure the realization of educational goals.

By the 2005-06 school year, states must begin administering annual, state-wide assessments in reading and mathematics for grades 3-8. States must implement science assessments to be administered once during each of the three levels of K-12 education: elementary, middle, and high school, a sample of the fourth and eighth grades in each state must participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading and math every other year to provide a point of comparison for the state's results on its own tests. Test results must be included individual student scores and be reported by race, income, and other categories to measure not just overall trends, but also gaps between, and progress of, various subgroups. ("An ESEA Primer" *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

*Academic improvement.* The main objective of the law was to improve school performance, and made quality education accessible to *all* children. Standards and accountability system were required to ensure realization of this objective. In addition to academic standards in curriculum contents, standards were also applied in proficiency tests. The proficiency tests were the main approach to check school performance.

States must attain academic proficiency - as defined by each state - for all students within twelve years. States must set a minimum performance threshold based on the lowest-achieving demographic subgroup, or the lowest-achieving schools in the state, whichever is higher. Each state must raise the

level of proficiency gradually (within “adequate yearly progress”) leading to 100 percent proficiency by 2004. (“An ESEA Primer” *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

*Corrective action.* Different from *Goals 2000*, which *encouraged* states to create standards, testing and accountability system, *NCLB mandated* that all states had adopted standards, testing, and accountability for all public schools. The standards, testing and accountability system needed to conform to a federal timetable for achieving student proficiency. The failure to meet AYP timetables might result in corrective actions, and other punitive sanctions, as identified below:

If a school fails to make adequate progress for two consecutive years, the school will receive technical assistance from the district and must provide public school choice. After a third year of failure to make adequate progress, a school will also be required to offer supplemental educational service chosen by students’ parents, including private tutoring. If a school fails to make adequate progress for four consecutive years, the district must implement corrective actions, such as replacing certain staff members or adopting a new curriculum. After five years of inadequate progress, a school would be identified for reconstitution and be required to set up an alternative governance structure, such as a reopening as a charter school or turning operation of the school over to the state. States are also responsible for overseeing districts as a whole, identifying those needing improvement, and taking corrective actions when necessary. (“An ESEA Primer” *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

*Report cards.* *NCLB* mandated every state and school district issue report cards that detailed student test scores, identified those schools that had failed to meet proficiency goals, and thus were in need of program improvement. The report cards provided parents, policymakers, and education reformers alike with a large amount of data from which to make judgments about the progress of school improvement efforts, real estate value, and other school choices. This information was also used by states to track schools' efforts to close the achievement gaps on reading and math between different racial, ethnic and income groups.

Beginning with the 2002-03 school year, states must provide annual report cards with a range of information, including statewide student-achievement data broken down by subgroup and information on the performance of school districts in making adequate yearly progress. Districts must also provide similar report cards, including district-wide and school-by-school data. ("An ESEA Primer" *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

*Teacher quality.* *NCLB* required that by 2005-06, all states should have a "highly qualified teacher" in every classroom where core academic subjects were taught. In the accountability system for improved school performance, teachers played a critical role, which may be interpreted as part of the reason why the standards-based reform of standards, testing, and accountability was strongly opposed by the teachers union. *NCLB* judged that a teacher must be "highly qualified" in a subject area by the standard, regardless of whether or not he or she was certified or licensed. This meant that the quality of teachers was also being standardized:

All teachers hired under *Title I*, beginning in 2002-03, must be “highly qualified.” In general, under the law, “highly qualified” means that a teacher has been certified (including alternative routes to certification) or licensed by a state and has demonstrated a high level of competence in the subjects that he or she teaches. By the end of the 2005-06 school year, every public school teacher must be “highly qualified.” (“An ESEA Primer” *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

*Reading first.* In addition to the focus on math and science, *NCLB* also put reading as a priority in this education reform. A new program was established to promote each child’s reading ability. “This new program, authorized at \$900 million in 2002, provided help to states and districts in setting up ‘scientific, research-based’ reading program for children in grades K-3 (“An ESEA Primer” *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.” *NCLB* continued the reform efforts to improve school performance in math, science, and reading.

*Transferability.* At the heart of *NCLB* was a “fundamental trade-off - it put in place a number of prescriptive new mandates on states and school districts but in exchange for meeting the new demands gave them greater flexibility in how they use increased federal funds” (Mc Guinn, 2006, p. 177). In other words, state and school districts had more flexibility in appropriating federal funding to improve school performance, though there were strongly encouraged to follow the demand for standards, testing, choice, and accountability.

Districts may transfer up to 50 percent of the money from several major ESEA programs; funds may be transferred into, but not out of, Title I. States



may transfer up to 50 percent of state activity funds between several major ESEA programs. (“An ESEA Primer” *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

*Flexibility Demonstration Project.* The NCLB also permitted some *Title I* schools to use federal funds for school-wide projects rather than for just low-achieving students, and it authorized a number of demonstration projects that relaxed federal regulations in some states and school districts. This discourse implied the influence of business and economy on education reform: funding was used to achieve students’ school performance. In other words, education efficiency and effectiveness became the focus of education reform.

Up to 150 districts may enter into performance agreements with the federal Department of Education under which they could consolidate all aid under several major ESEA programs, excluding *Title I*. Up to seven states may consolidate all state-administration and state-activity funding under several major ESEA programs. (“An ESEA Primer” *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

*Public charter schools.* The federal support of public charter schools carried a strong signal to push education as a marketplace. The federal support of public charter schools provided more parental choices for quality education. The reformers used this strategy to increase competition in the education market. They believed that this competition would “reduce costs, break the public school monopoly, and lead to improved student achievement” (Carl, 1994, p. 314).

Authorized at \$300 million in 2002, the program provides aid to help states and localities support charter schools, including money to help with the planning and design of charter schools, the evaluation of their effectiveness, and facilities costs. (“An ESEA Primer” *Education Week*, January 2, 2002, <http://www.edweek.org>.)

### *Globalization and NCLB*

All education reform efforts since the 1980s in the U.S. was heavily influenced by increasing globalization, and these education reforms were part of the process of globalization. As Martin Carnoy (2000) stated, globalization had increased the emphasis on standards, testing, and on meeting standards through education reform. An information and knowledge economy was the main feature of global economy. For quality education, which was of more information and knowledge-oriented, American education reformers struggled hard to improve school performance by establishing rigorous academic standards, launching more testing, providing more parental choices for school, and creating and holding schools to an accountability system. The chief goal of this two-decade standards-based education reform was to make America more competitive in the global market.

The accelerated pace of American education reform since the 1980s reflected the pace of globalization in the world, which was foremost in trade and economic policy debates when the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy happened in the U.S. in 2001. President Bush’s popularity was at its peak in the aftermath of 9/11 and he used this political capital in domestic policy by promoting *No Child Left Behind*. This incident eventually promoted the passage of *NCLB Act* in 2002. The accountability system in

*NCLB* was written in a business management style. Corrective actions and parental choices for schools pushed public education into a competitive marketplace. These strategies also reflected the influences of neoliberals in the world education and economy reform since the 1980s - opening a free market for education and economy with less governmental intervention. However, situated in an American context, *NCLB* also reflected that the federal government had expanded its power over education through accountability system reform.

#### *NCLB and Its Implications*

Although the new Bush Administration embraced the approach of rigorous academic standards and educational assessments to improve school performance, the *NCLB Act* focused on the state standards and assessments, instead of national educational standards and assessments as the Clinton administration had advocated. However, the new Bush administration integrated state-created educational standards and assessments with an accountability system. States had to submit their reform proposal of standards and assessments to the Secretary of Education for review. With the approval of the Department of Education, states were responsible for implementing the reform. Meanwhile, schools and local educational agencies were held accountable for improving school performance. Though *NCLB* clearly stated the prohibitions on federal control over state standards and curricula, “the federal government won more authority over schooling” (Kosar, 2005, p. 195).

“Adequate Yearly Progress”(AYP) and the use of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also facilitated states to hold schools and local educational agencies accountable, and states had to report to Department of Education;

they did this by connecting the distribution of resources from the federal government to student average test scores. Meanwhile, *NCLB* also held schools and local educational agencies accountable by empowering parents as consumers in three ways: First, it required states and local education agencies to provide easily understood information on student and school performance. Second, it granted parents of children in failing schools the right to intra-district public school choice. And third, it required local education agencies to grant parents of children in failing schools the right and power to choose among supplementary educational service providers for their children (Kosar, 2005, p. 190).

The *No Child Left Behind Act* was an evolution of education reform efforts, since the issue of *A Nation at Risk*. Built upon the reforms of the years past, this act gave the federal government more authority over schooling, and required states to show that they were implementing systemic reform, because creating timelines and plans were not sufficient for improving school achievement (Kosar, 2005). The *NCLB Act* increased accountability for states, school districts, local educational agencies, and schools; stressed rigorous academic standards and more testing; provided greater choice for parents and students (particularly those attending low-performing schools); and allowed more flexibility for states and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the use of federal education funding, which was closely connected to student performance on proficiency tests.

But unlike previous education reforms, the *NCLB Act* reinforced *Title I* accountability by requiring states to implement statewide accountability systems, covering all public schools and students. These systems were to be based on

challenging state standards in reading, science and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3-8, and annual statewide progress objectives, ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years:

Each state plan shall demonstrate that the state has adopted challenging academic content standards and challenging student academic achievement standards that will be used by the state, its local educational agencies, and its schools to carry out this part, except that a state shall not be required to submit such standards to the secretary. (Kosar, 2005, pp. 192-193)

The *NCLB Act* also clearly stated that assessment results and state progress objectives needed to be broken down by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency, to ensure that no group of children was left behind. School districts and schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals would, over time, be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring measures aimed at getting them back on course to meet state standards. Schools that met or exceeded AYP objectives or closed achievement gaps would be eligible for State Academic Achievement Awards. Schools that failed to meet objectives or failed to make progress would be penalized.

Therefore, if the previous education reforms since the 1980s were standards-based and test-based, the education reform launched by President George W. Bush in 2002 was included these goals, but most importantly, the reform was accountability-based. The *NCLB Act* did not emphasize national standards and national tests. Instead, it focused on standards and assessments created by states. However, the federal government won more control over schooling through the accountability

system. The new federal focus on accountability and the extension of federal policy to all children and schools marked a major shift in the governance of American elementary and secondary education. Built on reforms during the 1980s and 1990s that “challenged the original ESEA federal equity paradigm in education and its emphasis on resources, access, and presses” (Mc Guinn, 2006, p. 179), *NCLB* reinforced standards, testing, parental choice and accountability system to ensure that a quality education was accessible to *all* American children.

*NCLB* was also a federal response to the “failure of the 1994 reforms and increasing pressure on national leaders” (p. 181) for a better school results to meet the challenges from globalization. According to Cohen:

*NCLB* reflects significance in Washington with the pace of state-led improvement and, in particular, with the slow pace at which states have instituted tough accountability system. The legislation contains new and highly prescriptive testing and accountability requirement for states...and spells out in more detail than previously the consequences for school that fail to make adequate progress toward this goal. (Mc Guinn, 2006, p. 182)

#### Conclusion of American Reform Efforts

America is a highly decentralized society. Traditionally, local governments and communities had control over the schools. However, the increasing decline of American student school performance (interpreted mainly by test scores since the 1970s) caused increasing concerns among politicians, business officials, education leaders, and the public. This concern over student underachievement took on national significance with *A Nation at Risk*. This report about American underachievement in

school triggered a systemic education reform to improve student school performance over the next twenty years. By 1989 when President Bush held the first National Education Summit of the governors, over forty states had launched educational reforms by setting state standards and increasing the requirements for their schools.

President George H.W. Bush was not satisfied with American public school performance and ongoing education reform, however. He advocated for national standards and testing, and called for a “departure from the tradition of local control of education” (Jennings, 1998, p. 183). President Clinton continued the Bush administration’s efforts to reform American schools by setting national standards and tests. *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* included the key points suggested in the two national education summits and *America 2000* by the Bush Administration. When George W. Bush entered office in 2001, he clearly stated that to reform American schools was the first priority for his administration. The *No Child Left Behind Act* best supported the President’s belief that “education is a national priority but a local responsibility” (Kosar, 2005, p. 183). Bush’s educational reform continued to focus on standards and assessments, but gave states the flexibility to create their own which would approved by the Department of Education. At the same time, the federal government held states accountable through the Department of Education, and each state held the schools and local educational agencies accountable for school performance. Consequently, the Bush administration won more local control over schooling indirectly, compared with previous administrations. The new Bush administration did not speak of national standards and tests directly (in contrast to previous administrations), but *NCLB* contained a large number of prescriptive

mandates that influenced every major area of education policy and required states and districts to fundamentally change the way of running public schools (Mc Guinn, 2006).

Reforming the American school system entailed multi-faceted implications. Through this study, it is evident that there are several key points that need to be considered with regard to reform, including discourses contained in the reform documents, globalization, accountability, and standards. Many Americans agreed that standards-based educational reform was the only way to improve the schools. But questions about who was going to create the educational standards for American schools and how student school performance was going to be assessed, led to a continuing debate; these two issues touched the structure of American society and public education because schools were traditionally in the control of local governments and communities. The proposal of increased accountability further strengthened conservative concerns about the federal government's increased control over schools.

From a global perspective, educational reform since the 1980s was largely influenced by the neoliberals, who advocated decentralization and marketization of education, and focused on accountability, school choices, standards, math science education in the reform (Carl, 1994; Carnoy, 2000). Neoliberals thought education needed to be geared to the demands of job markets and economic development, and particularly to global competitiveness (Apple, 2004). Since the 1980s, the discourse of reform documents repeated international standards, global competitiveness, and the threat of global competition on America's preeminence in the global world. To



maintain America's preeminence in commerce, industry, and other fields, America needed to maintain its preeminence in education, in science and technology, which was "eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). Rigorous educational standards, increased testing, an accountability system, parental involvement and school choice would help create world class education, and maintain this excellence in education for America's preeminence in global competition.

As the world was becoming increasingly globalized, the U.S. lost its advantages in terms of geographic location, natural resources, human resources, advanced economy, and technology. The new global competition was largely dependent upon a quality education, as implied by all education reform discourses since the 1980s. On the one hand, the loss of advantages caused an insecurity of national elites, who dramatically stirred the desire for a standards-based education reform. On the other hand, business leaders attributed the decline of American economy to the decline of the quality of American education, interpreted by declining test scores. American education needed to be reformed. Higher educational standards, more proficiency tests, and higher accountability were required to improve school performance, so as to serve the American economy in the best way alongside the global competition.

When America was "*at risk*" in the 1980s, elite economic interests united around the *Nation at Risk* report, just as, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, *No Child Left Behind* united, for a brief period, liberals, conservatives, and other voices who agreed that an education reform for quality education through rigorous standards, increased

testing, and an accountability system was essential in increasing academic achievement in American public schools.

An interesting coalition of moderate and conservatives Republicans and liberal Democrats joined in an effort to remove all of the new K-8 annual testing from the bill, which pitted them against an administration that viewed the testing as the centerpiece of their accountability system. The coalition of members who opposed the new assessment mandates had varying reasons (tests don't accurately measure what students know, teachers will teach to the test, tests are biased against minority students, requiring more tests is an expensive mandate for states). (Kosar, 2005, p. 188)

At the national level, the push for academic standards had bi-partisan support and the federal government encouraged the adoption of new standards. The powerful influence of the federal government on school reforms was significant in the American context, given that the local government and community traditionally controlled schools. Overcoming opposing forces, Clinton successfully enacted his educational reform proposal through congress, and Bush brought his proposal of *No Child Left Behind* to congress and had it enacted into law. The power of the federal government over educational reform in the highly decentralized society could be interpreted as a result of increasing globalization.

Therefore, despite opposition to this standards-based educational reform, there was widespread enthusiasm for standards with the notion that they could contribute to equalizing or improving student achievement. Academic standards were expected to lead to more intellectually demanding content and pedagogy, so as to improve the

quality of education for all students; this would also help to establish uniform goals for schools, and would produce equality in student academic achievement (Berge, 2000; Buttram & Water, 1997; Cohen, 1996; O' Day & Smith, 1993, Rowan, 1996; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1999; Sutton & Krueger, 1997).

However, the opposing voices of this standards-based, increased-testing, and accountability-oriented education reform existed from the beginning. The opponents of testing seemed to gain support from some research, which found unintended consequences of high-stakes tests. Many educators argued that high-stakes tests narrowed the curriculum, pushing instruction toward a focus on lower level of cognitive skills, and simultaneously caused test score abuse (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffery, & Stetcher, 2000; Koretz & Barron, 1998; Koretz, Linn, Dunba, & Shepard, 1991; Linn, 2000; Linn, Graue, & Sanders, 1990; Stetcher, Barron, Kagaoff, & Goodwin, 1998). In addition, many educators also showed concerns that grade retention as a sanction for low test scores might not be able to improve educational achievement, and instead, might unintentionally increase the dropout rate (Anderson, 1998; Hess, 1986; Hess, Ells, Prindle, Liffman, & Kaplan, 1987; Hauser, 1999; Safer, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Temple, Reynolds, & Miedel, 1998). Some research also found the following: high-stakes tests that reward or sanction schools based on student scores might motivate some schools to push low-scoring students into special education, hold them back a grade, or encourage students to drop out so that the school's average scores look better (Darling-Hammond, 1991, 1992; Figlio & Getzler, 2002; Koretz, 1988; Shepard & Smith, 1988).

In conclusion, education policymaking was historically of a state and local responsibility and it did not assume a prominent place in federal politics. The Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, together with the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), initiated a new era of federal involvement in education, and laid the foundations of a policy regime since then (McGuinn, 2006). In the 1960s and 1970s, the equity rationale for federal involvement was to promote greater economic opportunity "through more equal access to more equally founded schools" (p. 25). By the 1980s, the contentious politics on equality rationale led to skepticism about the efficacy of federal education programs, and fueled a reform movement that called for administrative flexibility, parent choice, rigorous standards, increased testing, and accountability. Earlier reform efforts of the 1960s and 1970s to raise academic achievement by equalizing access to high-quality public schools remained only a distant echo in the current wave of standards and accountability that U.S. national education reform documents emphasized in *A Nation at Risk*.

The discourse of the policy documents also implied that increasing globalization promoted the neoliberalism in economy and education reform, which focused on standards and accountability. The widespread of standards and accountability reforms at state level during the 1980s and 1990s played an important role in legitimizing these reforms at the national level for *NCLB* in the new century. This educational standards-based reform, triggered by *A Nation at Risk*, evolved (and continues to evolve) into a complex educational reform based on standards, assessments, and accountability. Schools and local educational agencies continue to

implement the reform policies; the accountability system was created to help facilitate this practice. Market-oriented practice, through school choices and public charter schools, complicates this accountability. Even though schools did not get much money directly from the federal government, money was provided to schools by the state government. States were held accountable by the federal government, while schools and local agencies were directly held accountable by the state. The rewards and sanctions system forced schools to take the reform seriously and modify practices to meet the new expectations for the global economy.

Therefore, neoliberal and neoconservative reformers, confronted with the challenges from increasing globalization, steered federal education policy from a “longstanding focus on increasing resources for disadvantage students to a new broader goal of improving the academic performance of all students through the imposition of standards and accountability measures” (Mc Guinn, p. 201). The process of this reform of standards and accountability, starting from recommendations in *A Nation at Risk*, through involuntary standards and testing in *America 2000* and *Goals 2000*, to mandatory standards and accountability in *NCLB*, was more revolutionary than evolutionary as competition was increasingly intensified in global economy.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF REFORM IN CHINA AND THE U.S.:

#### CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT EFFORTS

##### Social Context as an Impetus for Change

Globalization has been a world phenomenon since at least the 1980s. Leaving aside the argument that the world economy has always had its global exchanges, there is no doubt that globalization intensified during the latter half of the twentieth century. Chinese and American reformers used globalization for their justifications of educational change. Increasing globalization helped facilitate worldwide educational reform; this is true in the case of both Chinese and U.S. education reform. In addition to a wide range of differences, there are also several similarities between the respective reforms.

##### *Agreement on the Challenge of Globalization*

*Globalization means competition.* Despite disparities in cultural, historical, social, economic, and political contexts between these two nation-states, the education reforms in both societies were informed by increasing globalization; reforms were initiated and targeted at improving the quality of education, so as to

meet unprecedented challenges and competition from globalization. “Quality education” and “globalization” were two important terms repeated in both reforms. Although “student school burden” and “promotion ratio” were repeated in the discourse of Chinese policy documents, the U.S. discourse repeated “standards,” “testing,” and “accountability.” Both education reforms were targeted to best serve the information and knowledge economy in a global world.

Chinese central leader Deng Xiaoping’s “three orientations” became the cornerstone of China’s education reform (Yang, 1995), which was creating more challenges for China’s socialist construction. Quality education was crucial for both economic development and for competition in the world market (Cheng, 2004; Ngok & Kwong, 2003). Deng’s discourse also implied that the Chinese looked to the aspects of economic development that emphasized post-industrialism and industrialism, at least when it came to education reform. Different from industrial economy which focused on goods-producing industry, the post-industrial economy focused on service industry. Technology, innovation and knowledge were crucial to succeed in post-industrial economy, which moved away from the industrial, manufacturing markets of old, and instead relied on service driven, information-based industries (Bell, 1973). This form of economic development also emphasized flexibility and creativity in a post-Fordist economic system, which emphasized on information technologies, professionalism, consumerism, and globalization. The Chinese education system, which traditionally focused on testing and state-planning, probably lacked this cultivation.

In the same year, *A Nation at Risk* was issued in the U.S. The National Commission on Excellence in Education warned the nation that the U.S. was no longer secure if its educational system failed to provide competitive human resources in this world of increasing globalization and international competition. As the report stated, as the world becomes increasingly globalized, an abundance of resources and geographical isolation would no longer be sufficient in bringing security to the U.S. This discourse meant that those advantages in industrial economy were inadequate for global competition in post-industrial economy which focused on technology, information and knowledge. The U.S. wanted to compete with other nations effectively, and therefore, needed to change, reform, and grow to meet the new demands of the world economy. Here, education reformers emphasized curriculum standards and academic rigor as well as accountability to ensure adequate standards and high quality. In a society already known for the cultivation of creative, flexible leadership, it was education standards and testing that the U.S. school reformers emphasized most, at least at the national level.

#### Same Goals, Different Approaches

“Quality education” is part of the political rhetoric in Chinese education reform, and the goals of quality education were evident when Chinese policy-makers eventually announced that exam-oriented education was not equivalent to a quality education. This implied that the quality of education could not be solely measured through students’ test-scores. In more recent years, employers, parents, and society have started to complain about the phenomenon that despite the rise in test scores, the quality of graduates was declining. Therefore, other measures, such as a graduation



exam, should be employed to assess teaching and learning. The de-emphasizing of the significance of the entrance exam was critical in promoting other types of educational assessment. Instead, quality education would mean providing students with all of the desired qualities for Chinese socialist construction and modernizations in a global context.

However, the U.S. policy-makers did not directly use the rhetoric of “quality education.” They did argue that the quality of education was declining because students test scores were declining. One of the recommendations to improve the quality of education was to raise standards and hold students and teachers more accountable for raising test scores. This direction implied that some U.S. policy-makers believed that the quality of education was connected to students’ test scores. The ultimate goal was to make the U.S. more competitive in the global economy.

#### *Agreement on the Goal of Quality Education*

The decisive force for this global competition relied on the quality of human resources and quality education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1993). Both China and the U.S. wanted a well-rounded, well-educated, and well-prepared public that could help each nation compete with other nations in the global market. Accordingly, both nation-states began to move toward quality education through a series of educational reforms.

#### *Disparities in Interpreting “Quality Education”*

Despite the consistent challenge of global competition and the need for educational reform in China and the U.S., there were some differences in the approaches that were adopted by the two nation states. The disparities in cultural,

historical, social, economic, and political contexts between these two nation-states resulted in different interpretations of “quality education,” which moved the reforms of the two societies into two different directions. Based on an analysis of language in the policy documents, it is obvious that policy-makers within the two nation-states interpreted the concept of a quality education very differently. The discourse in Chinese policy documents repeated that the chronic problems in education were “one-sided pursuit of promotion rate” and “school burden” which largely resulted from the testing-oriented educational system. The U.S. discourse implied that the underachievement was the chronic problem. It resulted from uncompetitive standards in curriculum content, performance, and in college admissions. Lower expectations and less school time also contributed to this problem. Education reformers insisted that rigorous standards, more testing and accountability system be the keys to solving this underachievement problem in public education. The underachievement problem negatively affected the competitiveness of the U.S. in global economy. Interestingly, the underachievement problem could be rectified, according to the reform documents, not by increasing resources and expertise at schools serving low-achieving students, but by standards, accountability, and testing.

#### *Quality Education Means Changing China’s Exam Orientation*

Historically, the exam-oriented education system helped the Chinese government choose the best talent for governmental office, promoted equality of opportunity, and prepared a large number of engineers, technicians, and professionals for the socialist construction (Hu & Seifman, 1987; Kwong, 1983; Rosen, 1997). But, after the tradition of an exam-oriented education for over thirteen centuries, many

unintended consequences became increasingly evident in China, especially as the world was becoming more globalized (Niu, 1992, Suen & Vu, 2006). The obvious negative consequences of the test-oriented education practice were an increased student study burden, narrowed learning and teaching practices that were geared toward testing, and the increased tendency to pursue test scores and promotion ratio for a higher level of schooling (Hu, 1986; Man, 1997; Suen & Vu, 2006).

*Focus on global qualities.* Chinese policy-makers came to realize that quality education could not be totally measured by test scores (Gu, 1994; Rosen, 1997). In other words, important skills, like creative and logical thinking, human potential, and individual capabilities would not be reflected in, or predicted by, test scores; book knowledge and other specific skills could not be precisely represented either. The trend toward globalization required talented individuals with creative and logical thinking skills, and better adaptability and resilience, instead of pure test-taking knowledge (Rosen, 1997). These “global qualities” would make China more competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Historical experiences and lessons in exam-oriented education also persuaded Chinese policy-makers to reduce the significance of tests and to move towards quality education.

These changing educational practices had hidden negative consequences on students, parents, education as well as the society (Hu, 1986; Niu, 1992).

*Promotion rate.* The discourse of “promotion rate” was repeated in all policy documents in Chinese education reform since the 1980s. The repetition of this discourse implied that promotion rate problem was intricately connected to other issues such as school burden and testing-oriented learning and teaching. It was the

one-sided pursuit of promotion ratio to a higher level of learning, particularly to college or university, which forced schools and parents to increase school burden. The school promotion also put parents, students, teachers and schools under great pressure, which geared learning and teaching to testing. The complexities of this issue created a big challenge to Chinese education reform which promoted a quality education through reducing school burden, reducing the amount of testing, but also stressed problem-solving ability, critical thinking, flexibility and creativity. The discourse of “promotion ratio” also reflected the tradition value of the Chinese people in education. This traditional value magnified the “promotion ratio” to a chronic problem in China’s education reform.

*Combating inequality.* Although most Chinese people believed that everyone was equal with regard to the opportunity for school promotion, when this decision was made based upon student test scores (regardless of social background) rural students were disadvantaged compared to urban students (Lin, 1993; Liu, 1992). For example, rural students had fewer educational resources in terms of the quality of teachers, equipment, funding, time, facilities, and social capital. Also, rural students had to learn, and were to be tested, on concepts and skills that were not connected to rural life (Lin, 1993). In other words, they were required to adhere to the curriculum and learning materials that were designed for urban students. They were trained to take tests, to score better, and to compete with their urban peers for a limited number of opportunities for college admission. Their learning did not support the necessities and goals of the rural area, where traditional ties were strong and where the Chinese state forced them to live; there was a very slim chance that these rural students could

succeed in this urban-centered education practice. In addition to the unequal competition between the rural and urban students for limited educational opportunity, there also existed unequal educational and economic opportunity between majority Han and disadvantaged minorities, although the Chinese government initiated policies in bilingual education and university admissions quotas for minority applicants (Colothey, 2005).

*Critics on “promotion rate.”* Deng Xiaoping, a neoliberal leader and reformer in China, reinstated the college/university entrance examination system. The discourse of Chinese policy documents reflected that Deng saw that China would move to post-industrial economy soon, which would demand a large number of professionals with technical skills and information knowledge. Education was the engine of the post-industrial economy. However, the discourse also reflected that critics became concerned with the testing-oriented education that put too much emphasis on test score and promotion ratio. They argued that China’s economic construction and modernization, confronted with new challenges from increasing globalization, demanded professionals with high creative and analytical skills, rather than high test scorers. Simultaneously, China’s government was also aware of the challenges from globalization, and attempted to tune education to new demands by “injecting more American-style flexibility into its math and science curriculum, and by placing less emphasis on exams and more focus on cultivating students’ creative and analytical skills” (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 23). From the discourse of critics and policy documents, it was clear that education served not only the political, but also

the economic needs. Education reform was largely geared to these two important goals.

*Reducing the school burden.* The discourse clearly demonstrated that the issue of overloaded school burden was inextricably knitted with the pursuit of promotion ratio in China's education. In order to increase student test scores, many middle school students had to spend over twelve hours per day at school and on schoolwork. The overloaded school burden was detrimental to student health. Many students were trained only for test-taking. In this focus on test scores, more and more top test takers committed suicide, participated in crime, or had different psychological, mental, social, or moral problems after they were admitted to college (Hu, 1986; Lin, 1993; Niu, 1992). Furthermore, though a few Chinese students scored better than their peers in other nations on international contests in math and science subjects such as physics, chemistry, and biology, Chinese students, as a whole, were not educationally ahead in terms of creative and logical thinking. Their ability to apply theory in actual practice was weak (Yang, 1997). Regarding Chinese students' learning ability, Li Jianhua, the principal of an elite public school in Beijing, commented:

On the surface, Chinese students can get very high scores in math and science.

But they don't really grasp the true meaning of math and science. Science and math are analytical tools we used to explore the world. People in China see math and science as a tool to change their destiny, not to explore the world.

(Cavanagh, *Education Week*, June 6, 2007, p. 22)

Discourse from both policy documents and critics revealed that the one-sided promotion ratio and school burden were two chronic problems that needed to be

resolved. The discourse also implied that the key to solving the two problems was to reform curriculum structure and education system, so as to fundamentally change the ongoing testing-oriented education system, promote quality education, and to meet challenges from increasing globalization.

*Quality education defined.* The discourse of policy documents repeated that the ultimate goal of education reform was to serve China's economic construction and modernization. Along with China's opening and reform in economic system, the world economy was in the process of shifting from industrial to post-industrial economy, which was increasingly dependent upon technology and information. The advancement of technology and information knowledge also accelerated the process of globalization. Knowledge economy and global competition required workers with high creative and analytical skills. So, in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese leaders and educators called for educational reform to improve the quality of education (Yang, 1995). Zhu Kaixuan, the former Minister of Education, stated in the 1990s: "Education is no longer dissociated from the economy...Education is closely linked with the economy, and has become an organic component and key content of the plans for economic and social development" (Rosen, 1997, p. 259). Minister Zhu (1997) suggested that Chinese education should be a quality-oriented education and the ongoing testing-oriented education should be reformed. Minister Zhu argued that a test-oriented education was *not* equal to a quality education. Test-oriented education did not necessarily produce competitive human resources to promote China's economic development and competitiveness in the global economy. The key to

winning the global economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was in promoting quality education (Ngok & Kwong, 2003; Rosen, 1997).

From the discourse of policy documents, the Chinese government defined “quality education” as an education that was targeted at promoting the comprehensive quality of the Chinese people, an education that was oriented to all students, and an education to improve student potential for well-rounded development (Yang, 1995; Yang, 1997; Zhang, 2000). Quality education emphasized instruction that was oriented to the whole class, rather than a small group of students who were hopeful for promotion; it emphasized students’ well-rounded development rather than test scores, and it emphasized interactive learning rather than passive learning by memorization.

The discourse of critics defined “quality education” as a comprehensive education that was intended to promote well-rounded enhancement of the basic education of all students, and at the same time respect each student as an individual. Quality education emphasized the exploration and development of the potential capacity of human wisdom and knowledge, and stressed the formation of a sound humanity in terms of moral, intellectual, and physical development. Unlike the traditional testing-oriented education, quality education focused on students’ problem-solving ability, creative and analytical skills, flexibility and responsibility.

The discourse also revealed that many students, school teachers, administrators, and parents still held “quality education” as a testing-oriented education. From this traditional perspective, promotion ratio and test score were the two important criteria judge evaluate education. This traditional and powerful



perspective strongly resisted China's education reform for a well-rounded quality education.

The central Chinese government and educator critics "encouraged Chinese teachers to move away from lectures, drills and memorization in class, and to invite more discussion and student-led activity" (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 23). The discourse repeated that the key to obtaining the well-rounded quality education was to reform the educational assessment system, which had overwhelmingly stressed student test scores (Liu, 1997; [www.gmw.cn](http://www.gmw.cn)). The central Chinese government's philosophy about reforming Chinese education was aimed at moving away from test-oriented practice and toward this quality-oriented education. The discourse revealed that the ultimate goal of this well-rounded quality education was to serve China's economic construction and modernization more effectively in a global competition.

It is important to note, however, that education reform in China did not do away with systematic competitive testing altogether. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a Chinese education system devoid of competitive examinations, particularly for university admissions, although it is conceivable that testing pressure will lessen for access to secondary education, as this form of basic schooling grows more universal.

As Sean Cavanagh (2007) commented after his visit to some public schools in China:

For generations, Chinese education has focused largely on exams, an approach that critics say has encouraged rote learning, not critical thinking. The exam system, however, has obviously staying power: It provides schools and universities with a practical way of selecting from a vast pool of qualified applicants. (p. 23)

This exam system also best motivated students to learn. As China's economy continued to grow and became increasingly urbanized, education became more crucial to improving one's socio-economic status, especially to those students living in rural areas. Many students from rural areas were reluctant to taking optional courses that would help open their minds, but not be tested in college/university entrance exams. The discourse implied that the ongoing exam system created a big hurdle for quality education.

*Curriculum, instructing pedagogy and quality education.* The discourse of policy documents revealed that testing policy reform was mentioned in tandem with quality education from the 1990s. The policymakers and critics insisted that education needed to be geared to the reform of the college/university entrance examination, the reform of the curriculum to be tested, the testing contents, the testing form, and the admission policies, so as to promote quality education for national economic development and global competition. The discourse also repeated that the key to China's basic education reform was in educational assessment reform; the focus of the educational assessment reform was on the reform of curricula, teaching material, and instructional pedagogy. This education reform reflected needs and challenges from post-industrial economy in which was characterized by globalization, high technology, information knowledge and flexibility. In a country where higher education opportunities were scarce, it was imperative that educational reform maintained some form of testing for university admissions; the subjective and unfair alternative would be personal contacts and political favoritism that would only continue educational inequality.

### *Tone, Tempo, and Language in Policy Documents*

Discourse analysis revealed that tone of the policy and regulations were prescriptive signals from the central government. This prescriptive tone reflected in the application of these words in the policy documents: “must,” “have to,” “should,” and other imperative words. The discourses of “school burden,” “promotion ratio,” “quality education,” “curricula reform,” “socialist construction and modernization,” and “globalization” were repeated all through government policy documents and critics. In spite of its prescriptive tone, the repetitions of these discourses could be interpreted that they were empty and powerless, and also reflected the ineffectiveness of this top-down reform movement. In addition, the repetition of these discourses implied the failure in policy implementation that reflected the localism gained more power in the centralized system, although all these major education reform decisions flowed from the central government and the Chinese Communist Party (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 23). Despite the repetition of the same discourses, the bureaucracy and inefficiency of the political system failed to provide concrete suggestions and strategies to realize true educational reform; the goal was too broad to define and there were no specific objectives for the reform. The lack of clear language and well defined objectives in the policy documents reflected that Chinese society was of high-level language communication in which the information recipient was supposed to understand the message from both the discourse itself and the environment in which the message was given (Nisbett, 2003). It also reflected that China did not have a well-institutionalized system, and there existed enormous flexibility in interpreting the discourse in the documents. Most importantly, China’s educational reform was

initiated from the top - the central government's edicts were interpreted by local governments, educational bureaus, and schools. There existed, therefore, disparities between policy-making and policy implementation. Such disparities resulted from their differentiated interpreting of the reform and its goals, and also from struggle of power and interests. Indeed, it may be the case that central government circulars on quality education serve as a cover for an education system that remains heavily dependent on testing. Unfortunately, after over two decades' reform efforts to de-emphasize testing, China's education system actually became more focused on testing.

#### *Quality Education Means Changing American Mediocrity*

Education policymaking in the U.S. is historically a state and local responsibility. However, the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown V. Board of Education*, together with the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), initiated a new era of federal involvement in education, and laid the foundations of a national policy regime in education since then (Mc Guinn, 2006). In the 1980s, the contentious politics on equality rationale led to skepticism about the efficacy of federal education programs, and fueled a reform movement that called for administrative flexibility, parent choice, rigorous standards, increased testing, and accountability.

The discourse of the policy documents also implied that increasing globalization promoted neoliberalism in economic and educational reform, which focused on standards, accountability, and the links between education and economy. The widespread standards and accountability reforms at state level evolved from recommendations in *a Nation at Risk*, through involuntary standards and testing in

America 2000 and Goals 2000, into mandatory standards and accountability in *NCLB*. The discourse revealed that *NCLB* was more prescriptive than persuasive to American public education as the global competition was increasingly intensified in global economy. The process of this standards-based reform was slow but continued to move on. Prior to *NCLB*, national policy was one of making suggestions to states for increased achievement. After *NCLB*, nation policy instituted sanctions for schools, districts, parents and students who did not improve.

“Standards,” “accountability,” “quality education,” and “globalization” were the main themes in the discourse of policy documents and critics in the U.S. education reform. Along with these main themes, other sub-themes emerged: “testing,” “expectation,” “academic achievement,” “parental involvement,” and “school choice.” The ultimate goal of the reforms was to achieve a quality education for demands and challenges from national economic growth and global competition. Rigorous academic standards and accountability systems were applied to fulfill this goal. Rigorous standards for math, science and reading were particularly focused. Parental involvement was also strongly encouraged. Behind the discourse of “standards,” “accountability,” and “quality education” were struggles and negotiations between the neoliberal and neoconservative policy-makers.

Set in a different social context, American policy-makers and business leaders understood the notion of a quality education in different ways. Some policy-makers thought that a quality education was measurable and that it could be understood as better school achievement or performance, represented by student test scores (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Jennings, 1995; Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005, Ravitch,

1995). To this end, reform had to be implemented to improve student test scores, students had to spend more time on schoolwork, and both teacher instruction and student learning had to be geared toward the tests.

Neoliberals interpreted quality education via students test scores, with a comparison to the internal standards. The quality of education was also understood by neoliberals as a crucial force for economic growth. In *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education stated that American education was eroded by an increasing mediocrity, in that American student test scores (especially in math and science) had suffered from a continuous decline, especially when compared with those of other developed nations. The pre-eminence of the U.S. “in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was being challenged and threatened. The purpose of educational reform was to improve student school performance so as to improve the quality of education for national economy and global competition. Yet, government policy documents also had a neoconservative thrust, in that the power of parents, teachers, principals, and others in authority were reasserted.

*Higher expectations.* The discourse analysis of policy documents and critics found that many education reformers attributed the underachievement problem to an insufficient student workload. Compared to students from some European and Asian students, American students did not have adequate challenges in curriculum, school work, and in testing. American students also did not invest adequate time in schooling. Therefore, instead of reducing the student workload and cutting down on the number of tests, like the educational reform in China, the U.S. educational experts

made recommendations to increase the number of school days, add more school time, require more tests, and raise educational standards, expectations, and requirements. Interestingly, these recommendations moved educational reform towards increased testing and standards, which would improve school achievement.

*Increased testing and accountability.* The standards-and-assessments-based educational reform was meant to increase the significance of tests. From the discourse analysis of policy documents, it was evident that education reformers believed that standards helped to define what students knew, and what they still needed to learn. Standards also helped to guide teachers about what to teach and how to teach (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Jennings, 1995; Jennings, 1998; Kosar 2005; Ravitch, 1995; Ravitch, 1996). Educational assessments were crucial in checking to see whether both learning and teaching practices were meeting the standards and requirements (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ravitch, 1995). So along with the evolution of the U.S. standards-based education reform, well-defined goals and more feasible strategies were developed. From the recommendations for education standards and quality in *A Nation at Risk*, President George H. Bush worked with the nation's governors and developed educational goals in the year 2000; based on *America 2000*, President Clinton urged congress to enact *Goals 2000: Educate America*. When President George W. Bush entered office in January 2001, his first priority was to continue the ongoing education reform, and he had congress enact the *No Child Left Behind Act* into law in February 2002. All three administrations advocated for more rigorous standards and assessments to improve American schools. Richard Riley, the former Secretary of Education, stated that the U.S. needed "high standards. In an

international market and information century, countries that meet world-class standards will have the edge.” American education reform needed “to establish internationally competitive standards so communities and states can, if they wish, gauge their curriculum and instruction against those that are world class” (Jennings, 1998, p. 52). President George H. Bush and President Bill Clinton advocated for national standards and tests for American schools. Under pressure from the neoconservative reformers, these initiatives on national standards and tests encountered strong resistance from different groups (Gordon, 2003; Jennings, 1998; Jennings, 1995; Kosar, 2005). President George W. Bush seemed to be very unhappy with progress of American education reform, although many states raised the standards and requirements for schools and students. George Bush thought the goals of educational reform were still unmet (Kosar, 2003). Consequently, President George W. Bush dramatically reinforced this standards-and-assessments based reform by holding states accountable for creating and implementing standards and outcome assessments. Through states, schools, teachers and students were held accountable for school improvement.

Interestingly, the renewed emphasis on testing in the U.S. was not accompanied by other reforms likely to raise aggregate student achievement, such as a nation-wide reform of the U.S.’s Byzantine system of school funding or an effort to centralize educational governance. Discourse analysis revealed that these potential reforms were excluded by both neoliberal and neoconservative reformers, who agreed that a greater accountability in education was sufficient for national economic growth and global competition. But neoliberal reformers believed that school education



needed to be marketized for a better efficiency. School funding needed to be linked to the output defined student test scores. Neoconservative reformers agreed that standards and testing were necessary for quality education, but they strongly resisted the intervention of federal government into education, which should be of local control.

The discourse analysis also found that standards-and-assessments-based educational reform reinforced the accountability system. Policymakers believed that test scores helped to implement the accountability policy (Sirotnik & Kimball, 1999). Test scores were used to evaluate student achievement and academic progress, to decide student grade promotion and graduation, and to make other educational decisions. The average test scores were also used to evaluate the performance of schools and teachers, in order to identify rewards or sanctions (Anderson, 1998; Hess, 1986; Hess, Ells, Prindle, Liffman, & Kaplan, 1987; Hauser, 1999; Safer, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Temple, Reynolds, & Miedel, 1998). Discourse analysis revealed that educational assessments created a bridge to help connect the standards with accountability, and facilitated the implementation of these two ideas in educational reform.

*Concerns about standards-based reform and testing.* The discourse also revealed the concerns of the opponents of standards-based reform (Jones, D. Jones & Hargroves, 2003). Opponents argued that the focus on standards and testing could drive teaching and learning to testing, which was detrimental to quality of education. Standards and testing could also narrow curriculum and diversity. They believed that quality education should focus on students' problem-solving ability, creative and

critical thinking, responsibility and flexibility (Graves, 2002; Linn, Graue, & Sanders, 1990; Lipman, 2004; Popham, 2004). These abilities could not be measured by standardized tests. Standards and testing could hurt educational equity, according to the critics. Quality education could not be achieved without educational equality. Merrow, 2001; Ohanian, 1999; Popham, 2004; Sandhotz, Ogawa & Scribner, 2004; Stetcher, Barron, Kagaoff, & Goodwin, 1998).

### *Tone, Tempo, and Language*

The discourse analysis of the policy documents found that the tone of the discourse became increasingly prescriptive. Recommendations for rigorous standards and more testing were put forward in the 1980s national standards and testing were encouraged by both Bush and Clinton administrations in the 1990s and mandatory standards and testing were required with accountability and sanction by the new Bush administration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Public education is often contested in the U.S. setting. However, neoliberal and neoconservative reformers, confronted with the challenges from increasing globalization, worked together to steer federal education policy from the focus of equity education to the focus of quality education. The process of this standards-and-assessments-based reform with accountability, starting from recommendations in *a Nation at Risk*, through voluntary standards and testing in America 2000 and Goals 2000, to mandatory standards and accountability in *NCLB*, was moving forward slowly but steadily as the global competition intensified.

### *Challenges in Promoting Quality Education in the Two Societies*

Education equity remained a great challenge in promoting quality education in the nation-states. In China, rural students and minority students might be at a disadvantage in competing with urban students in nationally standardized language, curriculum, instruction, and testing, though minority students might be awarded some extra points in the national college entrance exam. When China's higher education was completely pushed to marketplace in 1997, the funding responsibility for higher education was shifted to families. This policy heavily affected those students of modest means; they could not afford college education even if they achieved a good test score and were admitted to a college. For those students who had a college education but had a limited social capital, they might not be able to find a job after graduation from college. As a result, the social mobility they desired might not be possible purely through education.

Education equity was also a challenge for American education reform for excellence since the 1980s. Education equity was a priority in policy-making since the 1950s when the *Supreme Court's* decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* were made in 1954. Education equity was promoted when Presidents Kennedy and Johnson pushed to make schools more accessible to children in poverty, children with special needs, and various other groups of children who were yet to be readily accepted in the schools. Consequently, many programs and several types of legislation were initiated to help facilitate school access for these groups of underserved children. However, the standards-based education reform for school excellence in the 1980s changed this direction, and instead stressed quality education for globalization, and simultaneously caused more controversy in education reform.

The standards-based education for school excellence reflected some American people's faith in measurements such as test scores. *A Nation at Risk* attempted to convince Americans that the U.S. was at risk due to its students declining test scores. *The No Child Left Behind Act* held schools, teachers, and students accountable for progress, which was to be measured by students' test scores. The policy-makers of education reform believed that students' school performance could be measured by test scores. This belief affected education equity for a diverse student population.

### Culturally Different Interpretations Within Each Nation

#### *Dissent in China about Reform Direction*

Both China and the U.S. have tried to improve the quality of public education since the 1980s. However, the varied interpretations of quality education in the two nation-states could have led them to different approaches on the path towards achieving educational goals. Similarly, different interest groups within the two societies could also have different understandings of this central term-quality education. In the process of document study, it was evident both reforms were confronted with various resistance. In China, the resistance to the policy implementation mainly came from teachers, schools and local government due to their different interpreting of quality education. No significant disagreements in policymaking were found in the discourse analysis of the documents. However, the discourse analysis of the U.S. policy documents found that many debates, disagreements, and negotiations between different groups were evident in the process of policymaking. Once the agreement reached and policy was settled, education reform continued to move forward in spite of continuing debating and resistance.

Discourse analysis of Chinese policy documents found that educational policy-makers, business leaders, the public, teachers, and school administrators, parents and students have different understandings and concerns about quality education. Education was constantly tuned to serve economic and political purposes in China. When Deng Xiaoping, the neoliberal reformer, perceived that the world economy was in transition from industrial stage (manufacturing industry) to post-industrial (service industry) stage, and the world was in an accelerated globalization, he saw the necessity in reforming Chinese education to meet the demands and challenges from this transition. The post-industrial economy required workers of strong problem-solving ability, creative and critical thinking, and strong flexibility and responsibility. The traditional educational system was not able to provide such education for the new demands and challenges. The Chinese government and business leaders also witnessed the negative side of the testing-oriented education, so they attempted to reduce the significance of testing in education, and tried to refocus attention on to a quality education that emphasized students' all-round development for international competition in the global economy. The discourse analysis also revealed that Chinese government attempted to promote a quality education accessible to *all* children in that they believed China's socialist construction and modernization relied on the quality of the Chinese people, in stead of a small number of elites.

There were disparities in educational policy implementation in China. These disparities politically resulted from decentralization in which the local government gained more power in policy implementation. China was a highly centralized nation,

but the policy from the central government was not easily implemented due to great diversities and imbalanced development in different areas. The decentralization reform since the 1980s also created challenges for the policy implementation. The different interpretation of “quality education” also attributed to the disparities in policymaking and policy implementation. Discourse revealed that many teachers, school administrators, local government officials, parents and students still thought that good test score and higher promotion ratio were quality education. The quality education advocated by the central government was not measurable in education practice. The lack of clarity of language and objectives in policy discourse also led to flexibility in policy interpreting and disparity in policy implementing. In summary, educators and leaders agreed that change was necessary, but conflicting philosophies and interests within China led to continuing problems in actually making changes happen.

#### *Dissention in the U.S. about Reform Direction*

In contrast to China’s de-emphasis on testing, U.S. policy-makers and business leaders believed that there should be more testing in schools to make both students and teachers work harder for an improved educational quality, so that the U.S. could be more competitive in the global economy. This is a neoliberal belief. The neoliberal reformers focused on standards and accountability. Neoliberals used an approach of market economy to reform education, seeking for outcome performance and efficiency. Along with standards and accountability, school choice and consumerism pushed education to a marketplace.

The current study also found many policy-makers believed that the parents, students, teachers, and school teachers might have different understandings of such terms as quality education, standards, opportunity-to-learn (educational equality), accountability, and students' school achievement. On the one hand, many U.S. policy-makers believed that the parents, students, teachers, and schools should be held accountable for educational success and failure, while others wanted to put this responsibility in the hands of the federal government. Additionally, certain educational authorities mistook the idea of educational success as being equivalent to high test scores, while other groups fought to prevent rigid standards and performance measures from destroying the value of learning. The understanding of academic success, accountability, and educational quality differed even *within* the U.S. These contrasts in perspectives and approach fueled ongoing debates *within* the U.S. with regard to educational reform.

Due to continuing inequalities in American education that often are patterned on race and class privileges and oppressions, reform discourses in the U.S. contains dissent from the neoliberal reliance on increased testing, accountability, and choice. To these critics, the main concern of American education was in educational equality. The goal of education reform was to ensure quality education accessible to all children, regardless race and other socio-economic backgrounds. The ongoing standards-based education reform with an accountability system perpetrated the educational inequity. Therefore, the debates from these disparities and variances continued in the U.S.

In sum, it is evident that policy-makers within the two nation-states interpreted the concept of a quality education differently. In the U.S., policy-makers thought that a quality education was measurable and that it could be understood as better school achievement or performance, represented by student test scores (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Jennings, 1995; Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005, Ravitch, 1995). To improve student test scores, students had to spend more time on schoolwork and both teacher instruction and student learning had to be geared toward the tests. However, Chinese policy-makers came to realize that quality education could not be totally measured by test scores (Gu, 1994; Rosen, 1997). In other words, important skills, like creative and logical thinking, potential and individual capabilities would not be reflected in, or predicted by, test scores; book knowledge and other specific skills could not be precisely represented either. The trend toward globalization required talented individuals with creative and logical thinking skills, and better adaptability and resilience, instead of pure test-taking knowledge (Rosen, 1997). These “global qualities” would make China more competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Historical experiences and lessons in exam-oriented education also persuaded Chinese policy-makers to reduce the significance of tests and to move towards quality education.

#### Centralized vs. Decentralized Policy-making

##### *China’s Highly Centralized Approach*

In addition to remarkable disparities in the interpretation of a “quality education,” there also existed differences in the process of policy-making and implementation in the two societies. In highly centralized China, the visions of some



central government leaders played a crucial role in policy-making. Educational policy-making was not necessarily based on educational research findings. For example, the former central leader Chairman Mao Zedong and the former Premier Deng Xiaoping both heavily influenced Chinese education policy-making at different times. From 1949 to 1977, China's education reform and development was under the control of Chairman Mao Zedong (particularly educational policy practiced during the Great Cultural Revolution). Since 1983, the educational reform and development was directed by Deng Xiaoping. Over the last decade, other central government leaders also imposed some influence over policy-making. Policy-making in China was initiated, discussed, and executed by leaders; no formal research or educator interests were included in decision-making. Policy-making in China was entrusted to only the select few; the policies were based primarily on speeches and visions proposed by high government officials. Generally, these ideas and policies lacked the support from adequate professional research and findings, so there was some debate that stalled implementation. Additionally, there was often criticism about the consequences of implementation when the high-ranking central leader eventually retired from power.

Yet, there is also evidence of decentralization in Chinese governance, a trend that, in some regions, may contradict the top-down nature of recent education reform. In 1985, the Chinese Communist Party restructured education system by shifting school funding responsibility to the local governments, and giving more management responsibility to schools and local education bureaus. Funding responsibility change heavily affected the schools in underdeveloped mountainous areas where the local

government was too poor to support schools. Consequently, many school teachers in these areas were not paid, and many students dropped out because they could not pay the basic education fees. But most significantly, the decentralization process also affected the policy implement from the central government (Yang, 2003).

Finally, Chinese policy was not well-documented; compared with the detailed American documented policy, documented education policy in China was sparse. For instance, the centerpiece of policy documentation, “*The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party’s Decisions on Educational System Reform*,” issued on May 27, 1985, was only about eleven thousand Chinese characters, and if the document was translated into English, there would be less than ten thousand English words. This important document described the general goal of reform and the need for the reform; it only briefly stated how the reform should be implemented. In many cases, policies contained a few sentences, roughly stating the goal and need of reform and when the reform should begin. This over-simplification of the policy terms, including the lack of specific goals, approaches, evaluation, and standards, and the ambiguous word usage, produced large flexibility for those who would be facilitating policy implementation.

#### *Decentralized Approach of the U.S.*

In the decentralized United States, discourse of the reform documents reveal a limited for the president and other high-ranking federal government officials who wanted to impact educational policy. On the one hand, the U.S. president put forward a proposal, but the proposal was subject to debate in both the House and the Senate, where approval was needed. For example, President George H.W. Bush proposed

national standards and tests, and national education goals for American education reform to improve school achievement, but his proposal, known as *America 2000*, was not enacted by Congress (Jennings, 1995; Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005, Ravitch, 1995). American public education was traditionally in the control of the state and local governments (Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005, Ravitch, 1995). Even if the president's proposal was legally accepted and enacted by Congress, it did not necessarily mean that the local governments would implement it. For example, in 2005, Utah Governor Jon Huntsman signed a measure into state law that allowed districts in the state of Utah to ignore provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act* that conflicted with existing programs in that state. In response to such resistance, the Department of Education threatened to withhold educational funding from this state ([http://www.nsba.org/site/doc\\_cosa.asp?TRACKID=&CID=1046&DID=35928](http://www.nsba.org/site/doc_cosa.asp?TRACKID=&CID=1046&DID=35928)).

American policy-making has traditionally made more room for the research and findings of professional educators and social scientists than has Chinese policy-making. Standard-based reform, for instance, originated from the report *A Nation at Risk*, made by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The evolution of this reform involved professional organizations, and more research, more findings, and additional discussions during the process of policy-making (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Jennings, 1995; Jennings, 1998; Kosar, 2005, Ravitch, 1995). This democratic approach to policy was very different from the Chinese key-leader approach.

American reform policies clearly defined the purposes, goals, standards, measures, and other details that were necessary for ensuring policy implementation. Both *Goals 2000: Educate America* and the *No Child Left Behind Act* were very

lengthy in comparison with Chinese policy documentation; these documents clearly described how the educational standards-based reform would be implemented, what goals and purposes were expected from the reform, and the consequences that could result from non-compliance, the failure in policy complementation, as well as many other details. Language used in *NCLB* was highly prescriptive and clarified regarding the failure in meeting progress requirements. This comprehensive approach also differed from the oversimplification and general lack of information provided in Chinese policy documents.

#### Centralized vs. Decentralized Policy Implementation

From discourse analysis, it was evident that the policy-making process in the two nation-states was very different. Policy-making in China lacked adequate legal procedures. The discourse revealed that the policy was proposed or supported by the central leader(s) of the central government in China; the policy proposal was passed or enacted without negotiation or debate. However, American proposals that were initiated by the president, senators, federal government officials, or other leaders, required multiple discussions, debates, and negotiation hearings in Congress before they would be enacted. This process reflected American democracy; partisanship, in many cases, played a decisive role.

#### *China's Failure to Implement Policy*

In addition to the differences in the policy-making processes, this research also found that there were great disparities in policy implementation within the two societies. In the highly centralized China, the dissenting voices were rarely heard in public; instead, the people without opposition typically and wholeheartedly accepted

the policies enacted by the central government. Local governments and groups also spoke out about their determination to support and implement policies; however, the reform policy was not well implemented by the local governments and schools for their local interests or under other circumstances. In contrast, the reform in the U.S., in spite of continuing debates and resistance, moved slowly toward the prescribed goals.

#### *Documented Attempts at Reform*

Since the early 1980s, two chronic education problems in China and their consequences have been criticized; these problems included student school burden and the one-sided pursuit of promotion rate for a higher level of schooling. The central government tried to correct these problems in order to promote a quality education. Despite attempts, this discourse analysis revealed that these problems were never completely corrected. For example, the educational system in China is still exam-oriented in the year 2007. In the 1980s, critics thought that education in China was designed specifically for the promotion rate. In the 1990s, education was still test-oriented (Yang, 2003). In the 21st century, Chinese leaders, such as Chen Zhili (the former Minister of Education) and Jiang Zeming (the former Chinese President) repeatedly addressed the issues of school burden and promotion ratio without resolution. Several circulars also addressed the ongoing problems. Despite circulars, proposals, decisions, and speeches by central government leaders, problems remained. For over 25 years, the Chinese government failed to make progress, on reducing student burdens, despite efforts in favor of a quality education (Yang, 2003). In 2007, student school burden has not yet been reduced; teaching and learning is still

test-oriented; schools are still pursuing the one-sided promotion rate for a higher level of schooling; and student test scores are still a critical factor in decision-making with regard to college admissions, rewards or sanctions for teachers and schools, and promotions or demotions for local government officials (Yang, 1997; Zhang, 1997).

### *Missing Standards*

The failure of the Chinese education reform movement had various implications. Chinese reform has been unsuccessful in that Chinese schools have been handed over and controlled by the local government since 1985. Both the high centralism and decentralization process affected the education policy implementation. Policy documents lacked clarified directions and measure to guide the policy implementation. Moreover, the local government had been given control of funding responsibility and was able to hold schools accountable for a quality education, which was interpreted and evaluated by test scores (Yang, 2003). The only parts of education that the central government continued to control were curricular design, curricular standards, and instructional content. Yet, standards and assessments for a quality education have not yet been developed. Entrance examination scores were still the main emphasis in the college admission decision-making process (Yang, 1997).

### *Limited Resources*

Ultimately, it seems unreasonable and inefficient to assess the notion of a quality education without considering test scores. Additionally, it is impractical to make reward or sanction decisions for students, teachers, schools, or local government officials without considering test scores. Furthermore, educational resources are still very limited in the Chinese context. With a population of 1.3 billion

that remains heavily rural compared to the United States, the Chinese state was and is not wealthy enough to provide a college education for everyone who desires it. Even if applicants' test scores are competitive, slight variations in test scores remain a just and efficient way to decide who receives a higher level of education. Regarding the persistent problem in exam system, Sean Cavanagh (2007) commented: "The exam system has obvious staying power: It provides schools and universities with a practical way of selecting students from a vast pool of qualified applicants" (p. 23).

#### *U.S. Progress in Implementing Reform*

*Specific standards and accountability.* In contrast to China's education reform, this discourse analysis discovered that the standards-based educational reform in the U.S. seems to be a smoother and more successful path, despite some resistance in the process of policy-making, and despite continued debate about standards, assessments, and accountability. From *A Nation at Risk* to the *No Child Left Behind Act*, American initiatives toward a quality education have made slow but steady progress. After *A Nation at Risk*, forty-four states responded to the challenges of the report by defining academic standards and measuring student knowledge in core subject areas at various grade levels (Riley, 1995). From 1989 to 1997, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton continued to advocate for national standards for public schools and national tests for students. With the two education summits, the nation's governors agreed to raise educational standards in individual states and worked to establish testing to ensure that students met the standards.

Based on reforms at the state and federal levels during the 1980s and the 1990s, the Bush administration made standards-based education reform a mandatory

accountability system. With the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, President Bush's education reform continued to focus on standards and assessments, but states were given the flexibility to create state-by-state standards and assessments. Meanwhile, the federal government held each state accountable for progress through the Department of Education, and in turn, each state held local schools and educational agencies accountable for improvement. Consequently, the Bush administration indirectly won control over schooling. Standards-based education reform was being implemented nationwide. Since the establishment of state standards (Kosar 2003), many of the American public schools and school districts have made attempts to meet the standards, expectations, and requirements set by each state government; however, there are continuing debates about the consequences of standards, tests, and accountability.

There are complicated implications to the diverse ways of interpreting reform progress. The discourse of policy documents showed that the accountability system plays a critical role in the successful implementation of education reform. Influenced by the neoliberalism, the federal government distributed school funding to states on the condition that their proposal met the requirements of the Department of Education for standards and assessments. Local school districts and schools were held accountable to each state government for rewards or sanction, which had effectively moved the reform ahead. More and more people support the notion that standards and tests are necessary for quality education in the U.S.

Politically, raising standards to raise achievement remains popular. Yet, using federal power to raise standards has proven politically problematic. Though



indirect and less robust than true national standard, the present standards-raising efforts - as embodied in the 1994 and 2002 reform of *Title I* - are valuable nevertheless. With the federal government kept from a more direct and powerful role, the reformed *Title I* must serve as the main means for encouraging schools to raise education standards. (Kosar, 2005, pp. 215-216)

Finally, progress toward standards and school achievement, interpreted by test scores, has become easier to assess and evaluate.

### Conclusion of Reform Efforts

In conclusion, policy-makers in both China and the U.S. agree with notion that “quality education is an indispensable element for national development within a globalized economic environment that thrives on highly skilled and competitive labor” (Benveniste, 2002, p. 90). A country’s ability “to attract foreign capital and remain competitive in the global marketplace” is heavily dependent on its capacity “to have a ready supply of highly qualified labor” (p. 90). China has shown success in attracting foreign capital over the last decade, primarily because of highly educated labor, but also because of low labor costs. The swift changes in national assessment policy in the U.S. reflect a global culture that regards “student testing as a critical state function in education” (p. 93), although China, from its thousand-year experience of testing-oriented education, attempted to reduce the significance of testing. The reforms in the two nation-states both targeted at a quality education for globalization.

As evidenced by unique language and written documentation over many years of policy development and implementation, the education reform in the two nation-

states was (and continued to be) both convergent and divergent. On the one hand, both China and the U.S. attempted to reform education to improve quality and promote educational equity, so that the nation could be more competitive in an increasingly global economy. On the other hand, due to the differentiated historical, cultural, and social contexts, China and the U.S. each had a different understanding and interpretation of a quality education. Consequently, the education reform efforts moved in different directions; the United States moved towards more standardized testing, but China moved away from it by reducing the significance of testing. So, despite similar educational goals of quality and equity in education, the two countries show disparate interpretations of policy implementation in schools.

As a documentary study on education reform policies in the two nation-states China and the U.S., this study presented the big picture of education reforms in the two societies, with an emphasis on the principal documents that have directed the reforms. It is hoped that this study will provide future educational researchers and policymakers with examples of similarities and differences reflected in the two cases of educational reform within a global context. Such comparison of Chinese and American school reform encourages researchers to consider that globalization does not necessitate a single direction in education reform. Rather, state education systems respond to globalization in a variety of ways, spanning the continuum from increasing humanism and autonomy to increasing accountability and testing.

There are questions that remain, which require further study. For instance, why are there such disparities between policy-making and policy implementation in educational reform in China? What could the U.S. and China learn from the

experiences of the other, with regard to educational reform? How does the educational reform impact each nation's performance in the global economy? What political, social or other implications have resulted from the standards-based reform movement in the U.S.? How might a change in leadership affect the existing policies in each nation state? These are only some of the issues that require further exploration.

Future research could identify and focus on more specific topics within the theme of educational reform in China and the U.S. Additional research could be conducted with either qualitative or quantitative methods (or both), to help discover more details about different angles of educational policy reform, including the following: the efficacy of educational policy and reform in different cultures, the philosophy behind educational policy, the phenomenon of testing in different cultures, academic and cultural success in the global market, and the effects of educational change on each society.

Also, the differences between the two nation-states, and between educational authorities within each nation-state, might be analyzed more specifically or thoroughly with a case study approach. Future case studies on education policy and policy implementation at local level in the two nation-states could address comparisons that are beyond the scope of this study, particularly the thorny issue of policy implementation at the regional and local levels. Interviews with policy-makers and educators, questionnaires, and various other methods could provide additional information about critical policy language, the success of existing educational policy, and appropriate direction for future policy.

It is suggested in this dissertation that the form of educational governance - centralized or decentralized - is not necessarily a predictor that local authorities implement school reform according to the wishes of the national government. Whereas this research is a general study of the educational reform in the two societies, comparisons of local conditions in the two societies could pinpoint the discrepancies between the goals outlined in the reform documents and the realities of educational change at the local level. In addition to differences in the two societal contexts, there are a variety of similarities within the societies regarding policy-making and implementation in the two nation states, such as local resistance in policy implementation and the central government's continuing effort for quality education. This research is expected to provide some information for an understanding of the two reform efforts in the different nation-states, and hopefully, this mutual understanding will benefit continuing efforts toward a quality education in an increasingly globalized world.

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